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Reading ruptures: empathy, gender, and the literature of bodily permeability

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READING RUPTURES: EMPATHY, GENDER, AND THE LITERATURE OF BODILY PERMEABILITY

by

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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For Emory, Prudence, and the New One. Thank you for being with me during the writing process, some of you more literally than others.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *empathy* has long been studied by literary scholars. Empathy can refer to several different affective, political, and aesthetic phenomena, however, and its often assumed connection to reading is far from proven. This dissertation explores three specific aspects of empathy as they appear in postwar North American fiction, with special emphasis on what they suggest about empathy's relationship to gendered embodiment. *Reading Ruptures* examines *readerly empathy* (an aesthetic encounter with literature) in representations of dubious sexual consent; *affective empathy* (a political sentiment) in representations of pregnancy; and *communicative empathy* (a linguistic trope of science fiction) in representations of language viruses. While these distinct types of empathy can be conceptualized and experienced separately, they illuminate each other's political opportunities and challenges when placed in conversation. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that although science fiction's contributions to this conversation have historically been undervalued, SF offers fresh insights into empathy's continuing and evolving relevance for posthuman embodiment and postmodern literature.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

When we talk about empathy, we might be referring to any of a number of different experiences. Empathy can be an emotional or mental process of "feeling with" another person, a physical experience of picking up the vibe of a room or unconsciously mirroring what we see, or a sense of being immersed in a work of art. In science fiction, it can also be a kind of communication that sends and receives emotions without the need for words. Empathy is usually assumed to be a good thing, and even a prerequisite for ethical action. It is also assumed to be strengthened by reading literature. But which kind of empathy do we mean when we make such statements? How is it produced by reading? And how does it make us better people?

This dissertation considers these questions by separately examining three meanings of empathy. Whether it is a connection with a work of art, a sense of "feeling with" another person, or a science fictional kind of communication, empathy has strong—and sometimes unexpected—ties to literature. It also has a complicated relationship with bodies, sometimes seeming to require them and sometimes seeking to transcend them. This project focuses on one bodily experience per chapter (sexual violence, pregnancy, and virality), using them to explore the political implications of the types of empathy discussed. This dissertation ultimately argues that science fictional empathy, an often neglected use of the term, is crucial to fully understanding empathy's continuing importance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: It's All in Your Head

Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's 1993 dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, is an empath. More precisely, she suffers from a condition called "hyperempathy," which means she physically, viscerally feels other people's pains and pleasures. The novel attributes this ability—or disability, as Lauren would call it—to a drug her mother took while pregnant with Lauren, but the details of how Lauren's hyperempathy works are fuzzy at best, referring only to "scrambled" neurotransmitters (12). Early in the novel, Lauren explains to readers how her hyperempathy manifests itself, what has caused it, why she needs to keep it hidden from everyone but her family, and the effects it has had on her interpersonal relationships, but Lauren and her father also repeatedly characterize hyperempathy as "not real." In the first description of the phenomenon, Lauren narrates, "My father… tells me, 'You can beat this thing. You don't have to give in to it.' He has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about. The sharing isn't real, after all. It isn't some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It's delusional. Even I admit that" (11). Butler seems to affirm Lauren's father's understanding of hyperempathy in her 2000 interview with *Locus*, saying, "in the 'Parable' books I wanted to keep everything as realistic as I could. I didn't want any powers, any kind of magic or fantastical elements. Even the empathy is not real—it's delusional."

Despite a seeming consensus among characters and author, however, the novel strains against these claims that Lauren's hyperempathy is not real. The text of *Sower* creates an illogical point of tension around hyperempathy by casting it as an individual "weakness, a shameful secret," because it is never made clear how a birth defect supposedly native to Lauren's

brain can produce what is properly understood as an interaction between herself and at least one other being (178). If Lauren were isolated from other people, her ability would never manifest itself—and indeed, if she weren't comparing her reactions to others' she would never know her intersubjective experiences are unusual. Both the mechanism of hyperempathy and Lauren's understanding of it are contingent and relational, then, despite what Lauren might believe about it being her personal delusion.

To begin to put Lauren's fictional *hyperempathy* in conversation with the larger cultural concept of *empathy*, I'd like to ask what it would mean for this ability to be "all in her head," unpacking two meanings of that evocative phrasing. The first is that Lauren's readings of and reactions to other people have nothing to do with those other people, and the second is that hyperempathy involves only Lauren's mind and not her body. The debate around hyperempathy's realness staged in the text of *Sower* serves to foreground these two fundamental challenges to the familiar practice and experience of empathy. The first is the suspicion that empathy is at its core narcissistic, that when someone "feels with" another person, she does so because she recognizes something about herself in what she sees. This recognition suggests that she only cares about others' circumstances and feelings insofar as she imagines them happening to herself. It can be argued that the empathizer is relating only to a version of herself and not truly to the other. In this sense, empathy can be said not to be real, in the same way that Lauren believes her *hyper*empathy not to be real: it is possible that it is not the effect of a genuine interaction between two people but simply a projection outward from the empathizer.

When characters in *Parable of the Sower* question hyperempathy's legitimacy, they do so on this basis; it is, according to them, something that emanates outward *from* Lauren rather than

inward *toward* her. However, even when characters say that hyperempathy is all in Lauren's head, the novel clarifies that she is not merely imagining that she can feel others' pain and pleasure. When a companion speculates, "'Maybe you are normal. I mean if the pain isn't real, then maybe—'" Lauren cuts him off, responding, "'Maybe this sharing thing is all in my head? Of course it is! And I can't get it out. Believe me, I'd love to'" (196). Furthermore, Lauren provides for the reader physical proof of her affliction. She explains that she hasn't "bled through the skin" upon seeing someone else's blood since her childhood (11), but she recounts the experience for readers as implicit proof that while her hyperempathy is not real, it is not simply imagined. In saying hyperempathy is delusional, then, Lauren seems to put forward a model of her experience reminiscent of discourses of mental illness. If she is causing her own "sharing" (as she calls it), it is unconscious and not within her control, so her father strikes readers as cold and misguided when he suggests she can simply choose to stop doing it. Despite deconstructing her father's exhortations that she overcome her disability, though, Lauren still agrees with his assessment that the experience is not real, and she does so based on her belief that the ability originates with her. Rather than a receiver in communication with senders, Lauren sees herself as both sender and receiver, a closed loop in communication with no one but herself.

Still, there are moments of slippage in the novel when Lauren's understanding of hyperempathy seems to be wrong, or at least incomplete. One way Lauren knows that hyperempathy originates within her is that people can deceive her, for example by faking injuries. However, there are also times when people try to deceive her and are not successful, or she intuits how people are feeling in spite of their appearance and not because of it, such as when she narrates, "I looked at her. She had a big swollen purple bruise in the middle of her forehead,

like a misshapen third eye. I don't think it hurt her much, though" (255). Lauren bases this conclusion on the fact that "It didn't hurt *me* much" (255, emphasis added). Lauren also describes consciously trying to ignore people's pain, and that purposeful lack of close attention combined with the fact that people hide their injuries from her suggest that if she is still picking up their pain it might actually be originating with the other person—that hyperempathy in the world of this novel does include both a receiver and a sender. Lauren's mother's drug use might have caused physiological changes for Lauren, but it would not cause the people Lauren shares with to send their experiences to her. The way Lauren (and apparently Butler) understand hyperempathy is as a psychological disability contained within Lauren's brain. The alternate possibility embedded in the text is that hyperempathy could also be a social phenomenon facilitated but not solely caused by Lauren's unique physiology.

The second issue Lauren's claim of "all in my head" raises is empathy's mind-body conundrum. In explanations of empathy ranging from Adam Smith's work on *moral sympathy* to contemporary psychologists' studies of *mirror neurons*, "feeling with" another person typically entails looking at her, cognitively interpreting her situation and emotions, and then making a leap from cognition to affect by conjuring up trace memories of similar experiences. Alternately, the process has also been theorized to work in the reverse order, from visceral, affective mirroring of the person empathized with to a cognitive understanding of the experience. These interminglings of cognition and emotion are part of most understandings of empathy, yet the interminglings of mind and body in empathy are often glossed over, especially in the term's popular uses. In popular conceptions, empathy is foremost a mental experience that has the potential to produce bodily results, such as crying, gasping, or blushing. I argue instead that empathy is an embodied

affect as much as it is a mental one, and that the interactions across its various registers—cognitive, emotional, sensorial—form a complex circuit with unclear and varying relationships of causality. Many literary representations of empathy register the complexity of the role of the body in empathy through the plot devices they use to make sense of the phenomenon. The embodied experiences of sexual contact, pregnancy, and virality that *Reading Ruptures* considers all serve not only as metaphors but also as crisis points for empathy. The permeabilities they highlight between bodies and subjects complicate any easy interpretation of empathy as either projected by the empathizer or sent by the empathized with, instead suggesting that empathy might be a co-created affective experience for all parties involved.

Parable of the Sower draws readers' attention to empathy's mind-body relationship by reversing it. If empathy is typically thought of as a cognitive/emotional exercise that can cause bodily effects, this novel makes hyperempathy a bodily experience that has the potential to produce cognitive/emotional effects. Lauren shares people's physical sensations, vomiting when they are sick, feeling dizzy and disoriented when they suffer concussions, becoming immobilized when they are shot, and getting "caught up in their lovemaking" (200). But despite Lauren's sharing of physical pain and pleasure, she does not share people's emotions—in fact, she is frequently most emotionally self-absorbed when she is sharing someone else's physical pain, an irony especially highlighted in Lauren's emotional distance from other people, seeming cruelty, and unreadable facial expressions, none of which is traditionally associated with empathy. This disconnect between Lauren's body, which helplessly mirrors other people's physical experiences, and her thoughts and feelings, which she consistently uses to distance herself from those people, highlights the role of *mediation* in literature about empathy. In much of the literature of bodily

permeability, there exists a mediating force—usually bodies or texts—that renders communication imperfect by virtue of relaying messages through the constraints of a medium. This mediating force establishes a boundary between subjects and then seeks to deconstruct that boundary by effacing itself. This twofold process is similar to what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin name "a double logic of *remediation*" (5). They argue that the postmodern literary impulse toward *hypermediacy*, which draws attention to the mediating function of the text, expresses the same desire as literary attempts at *immediacy*, which seek to efface textual mediation. "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation," Bolter and Grusin argue. "[I]deally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). What's more, "Immediacy depends on hypermediacy" (6). In the context of literature about empathy, the same double logic is at work: textual and bodily mediations, erecting barriers in the way of perfect, immediate understanding, ironically evince through their self-referentiality a desire for transcendence of those very barriers. *Parable of the Sower* makes the embodied nature of empathy a hypermediation by focusing on it almost to the exclusion of empathy's cognitive and emotional aspects.

Sower's reversal of the way empathy is typically thought of, making it primarily physical rather than cognitive or emotional, demonstrates a classic move of science fiction. SF frequently literalizes what appears metaphorical elsewhere, and biologizes what is usually understood to be social. *Sower* fits only awkwardly into the genre of science fiction, however. Despite the novel's dystopian setting, Butler claimed she wanted to keep everything in this novel as realistic as possible. *Sower* is modestly extrapolative rather than speculative, and according to my students, Lauren's hyperempathy is the only thing that makes it "feel" like science fiction; for that reason

it is a polarizing presence in the novel. I point out this categorical tension to draw a distinction between science fiction as a genre, however its boundaries are defined, and science fiction as a mode of thinking, with a set of associated tropes and tricks, that can occur in any generic context.[1] It is this second usage of the term that is applicable to the fiction taken up in this dissertation, fiction that, even when classified as realist, postmodern, or mainstream literature, biologizes the typically social experience of empathy.

Despite setting up hyperempathy as a primarily physical experience rather than an emotional one, *Sower* complicates this understanding as well, especially during one climactic moment during which Lauren's traveling community is violently attacked. During the battle, Lauren "dies" with other people three or four times. After the fighting has ended, one of her companions tells her "You're bleeding" (297). Lauren narrates, "I was surprised. I tried to remember whether I'd been shot. Maybe I had just come down on a sharp piece of wood. I had no sense of my own body. I hurt, but I couldn't have said where—or even whether the pain was mine or someone else's. The pain was intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt… disembodied" (297, ellipsis in original). After she has had some time to rest and recover, she continues: "I got up slowly. My side hurt. … Now, though, I felt half-conscious, half-detached from my body. I felt everything except pain as though through a thick layer of cotton. Only the pain was sharp and real. I was almost grateful for it" (300). Although Lauren's pain is extreme, during the attack and

[1] Although attempts have been made to define science fiction since the advent of the term, many contemporary scholars, myself included, prefer to sidestep any debate over where to draw SF's boundary lines. In place of or alongside SF as a generic category, Brooks Landon describes "science fiction thinking" as encompassing "a set of attitudes and expectations about the future" related to ways of thinking *about* science fiction and ways of thinking that *guide* science fiction (4). John Rieder, borrowing from Rick Altman's understanding of genre as a historical process, defines SF as a "mutable" category with "no single unifying characteristic," and "a way of using texts" rather than the texts themselves (193). Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould affirm this understanding of genre and argue that "there was never such a *thing* as SF," and "ways of producing, marketing, distributing, consuming and understanding texts as SF… are in a constant, unending process of coming into being" (43, italics in original). Finally, Brian Attebery argues that SF should be understood not as a formulaic genre like other popular forms but as a set of "parabolas" extending into any number of genres and leading in infinite directions.

after it her narration emphasizes disembodiment side by side with embodiment. She uses language that points to her experience of hyperempathy as one combining physical, emotional, and cognitive effects, one that makes her both hyperaware of and removed from her typical senses of consciousness and embodiment. These passages further destabilize Lauren's understanding of her ability (how can she feel her own and others' combined pain when she has no sense of her body?) but they also reveal the mixture of physical, emotional, and cognitive registers within the concept of empathy itself.

Three Empathies: Readerly, Affective, Communicative

Reading Ruptures examines representations of feminized embodiment in post-war North American fiction for what they reveal about literature and empathy's vexed yet powerful relationship. In order to break down some of the various uses and discourses *empathy* encompasses, I divide the concept into three admittedly porous categories.

In the first, *empathy* is a readerly aesthetic, an experience of being immersed within a text. In this usage, the term conveys a sense of permeability between reader and text that is distinct from any sympathy a reader might feel for characters. This kind of empathy describes the reading experience of being positioned (narratively and politically) in relation to a text and its story-world. In using the term empathy this way, I borrow heavily from Wolfgang Iser's writings on *entanglement.* Iser explains the aesthetic experience of reading as one of coming to a space between the "real" world and the imaginary, and between the reader's actual self and the viewpoint he is made to see through while reading. This back and forth interaction is not dialectical, as it does not resolve in synthesis. Rather, it is the continual *negation* of the two poles

in conversation with each other that makes the aesthetic experience of reading worthwhile, partly by showing us our own way of seeing the world and a different one in contrast to each other. Countering criticisms of Iser's phenomenological theories as apolitical, and as affirming the reader as a liberal humanist subject, Winfried Fluck argues that the key for Iser was "the development of a theory of literature that would emphasize literature's potential to expose the limitations and unacknowledged deficiencies of accepted systems of thought" (179). In his later writing, Iser shifted his focus from negation to *negativity*, which is less concerned with the reader coming to books for a realization about his limited perspective achieved through its negation—because if that was the whole story, readers would have no reason to read more than one book, and literary criticism would be reduced to always writing the same thing about literature's potential and nothing about each text's specificities (Fluck 191-2). Instead, "[w]hat the term negativity allows Iser to do is to transform the configuration of an interplay on 'in-between' from a movement between either-or opposites… to one between present and absent dimension[s] of the text—and thus to stress the crucial role of imagining acts in aesthetic experience" (185). Iser argues that the gaps in a text are crucial to this experience, because they make readers aware of their "capacity for providing links," as well as the discrepancies between the patterns they project as they read and the text's fulfillments and frustrations of those patterns (285). "This entanglement of the reader is, of course, vital to any kind of text," Iser argues, "but in the literary text we have the strange situation that the reader cannot know what his participation actually entails. We know that we share in certain experiences, but we do not know what happens to us in the course of this process" (295). As in other experiences of empathy,

entanglement seems to include multiple actors—here, the reader and the text—co-creating a shared affective state or space.

This understanding of entanglement does not necessarily affirm a liberal humanist reading subject, and might even work toward destabilizing such an assumption. “The argument is not for an elusive position outside of ideology,” Fluck explains, “but for an awareness of the provisional nature of any given worldview” (188-9). Entanglement with a literary text—the experience I call *readerly empathy*—does not have to be understood as an autonomous individual coming to a new understanding about himself and his relationship with the world; it can be understood as a relational subject aesthetically experiencing his own relationality.

Empathy is secondly a political emotion describing the phenomenon of “feeling with” or “feelings one’s way into” another person. This aspect of empathy emerges from eighteenth-century Enlightenment discourses of moral sympathy. Before the coinage of *Einfülung* in German in the late nineteenth century and its translation as *empathy* in English in 1909, the term *sympathy*, as used by David Hume and Adam Smith, covered much of the same territory, including the transmission of emotion, the role of physical or mental mimicry, the experience of feeling vicarious or trace emotions, and the suggestion of an associated component of benevolence. Since the divergence of the two concepts, sympathy has more often been associated with responses to others’ negative emotions and experiences (responses including compassion and pity) and with altruism, whereas empathy can be used more neutrally and without the assumption of associated behaviors. Nancy Eisenberg explains the distinction between empathy and sympathy by claiming that *empathy* names the experience of feeling what another person

feels or is expected to feel, while *sympathy* names an emotional response to another's emotions that is not assumed to be identical with what that other is feeling (72).

As part of this same lineage, empathy is currently sometimes used as a marker of normative human psychology. During the peak of philosophy's and psychology's interest in empathy in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, it was claimed as the solution to the philosophical "problem of other minds," and "the method uniquely suited for the human sciences" (Stueber "Empathy").[2] Even thinkers who have taken a more skeptical or dismissive view of empathy have retained this same cluster of meanings and associations: John Rawls's famous "veil of ignorance" argument explicitly accounts for anti-empathetic motives and actions, and Emmanuel Lévinas, while never using the term empathy, theorizes a kind of ethics that recognize the absolute difference of the Other—an ethics rooted in the impossibility of empathy. A contemporary resurgence of interest in empathy has occurred partly because neuroscience has taken up the issue and found that when a subject observes another person's actions, the same areas of the subject's brain are stimulated as when she herself performs the actions. This observation confirms for some that empathy functions through processes of inner imitation, but such interpretations have also been criticized for assuming that mirroring brain activity indicates the subject's cognitive and affective understanding of what she observes.[3] Although this cluster of usages ranges over several theoretical and practical fields including philosophy, psychology, and neurology, I combine them under the term *affective empathy* to emphasize the experience's interpersonal qualities (as distinct from a subject's aesthetic encounters with art and literature)

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[2] Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut described empathy as a method of gathering data in the therapeutic setting, and other psychologists including R. J. Blair, Alice E. Vélez Garcia and Feggy Ostrosky-Solis, and R. Peter Hobson have posited that empathy is causally linked to the development of prosocial behaviors.

[3] Jennifer H. Pfeifer and Mirella Dapretto summarize the findings of many researchers on the mechanisms of mirror neurons. For the debate over mirror neurons' relationship to empathy, see Marco Iacoboni and Karsten R. Steuber.

and its primary role as a cognitive/emotional/embodied phenomenon (as distinct from its role as a method of non-linguistic communication). In literary studies, work on this type of empathy is often subsumed into considerations of sympathy, which primarily occur surrounding the affects and effects of sentimental and political literature.[4]

Finally, in the third usage I consider, *empathy* names the science fictional ability to transmit or receive emotion without the need for spoken or written language. In science fiction literature and film, empathy is comparable to but not synonymous with *telepathy*, and it can be an innate feature of a nonhuman species, an experience humans can achieve through the use of futuristic technology, or an ability available to a subset of gifted (or cursed) humans. Walter E. Meyers and Susan Mandala consider the effects of telepathy on science fiction's engagement with linguistics, a topic Samuel R. Delany and Istvan Csicery-Ronay each also touch on in their work on science fiction language, and Nicholas O. Pagan argues that science fiction as a genre is particularly well-suited for studying Theory of Mind (the ability to attribute similar and different mental states to oneself and to others). There is very little critical work on the mechanisms and effects of science fictional *communicative empathy* within fiction, however, let alone on its relationships to readerly and affective empathies, a gap this project seeks to fill.

Creating this taxonomy of empathies is useful because separately considering several of the discourses in which the term circulates allows for a fuller understanding of how those discourses combine and contribute to one another. It bears repeating, however, that these categories construct theoretical boundaries where in practice there is a great deal of slippage. One way to understand *readerly empathy* is as an identification and alignment with the text,

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[4] See for example Ann Douglas; Jane Tompkins; Elizabeth Barnes; Lauren Berlant (*The Female Complaint*); and Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds.

which I want to consider apart from the identification and alignment with characters that could be classified under *affective empathy*, but in separating these two reading phenomena I am admittedly making a fine distinction, especially since, in the context of what I designate *affective empathy*, philosophers often make reference to the functions and effects of reading. Theodor Lipps, one of the foundational theorists of empathy, defined it as an aesthetic experience central to subjects' appreciation of art as well as "the primary basis for recognizing each other as minded creatures" (Stueber "Empathy"). Literary theorists of empathy also regularly blur distinctions between empathy as an aesthetic experience of art and empathy as an affective connection with other people, by arguing that the first facilitates the second, and even critics who challenge such a causal relationship slip among various uses of the term.[5] Blurring the boundary between *affective* and *communicative empathies*, contemporary neurological researchers of empathy regularly use the terminology of "low level" and "high level *mindreading*" to distinguish between physical mirroring and cognitive shifts in perspective (Hammond and Kim 7, emphasis added). Finally, what is shared and apprehended through *communicative empathy* but the emotional states otherwise communicated through *affective empathy*, and how are those states transferred if not through a paradoxical process of nonlinguistic *reading*?

The structure of this project is designed to tease apart these three connotations of empathy, but also to facilitate a consideration of how they operate with and through one another. One way to think about the organization of *Reading Ruptures* is through this taxonomy. Readerly empathy establishes the method for the cultivation of other kinds of empathy in literature, while

[5] For critics who argue that reading literature leads to affective empathy and altruism, see Mary-Catherine Harrison, Christine Jarvis, and Martha Nussbaum. For critics who challenge this relationship but still understand readerly and affective empathy as basically the same thing, see Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim. It is primarily Suzanne Keen from whom I take the starting point of distinguishing between a reader's "situational empathy, which responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance" and the affective empathy a reader might feel for fictional characters (*Empathy* xii).

affective and communicative empathies—in a sense flip sides of the same coin, the one focused on the receiver of affect and the other focused on the sender—can be thought of as products of that reading relationship. Another way to think about the project's organization is through the three feminized bodily ruptures I examine: the inward penetration of sex, the outward division of pregnancy, and the radical destabilization of the inner-outer binary effected by virality.

The various uses of the term *empathy* I track share an ambivalent relationship with embodiment: at times the body is the necessary site for sharing empathy, and at times empathy is a longed-for escape from the frustrations of embodied communication. Post-45 North American literary explorations of all three aspects of empathy reveal a desire for direct access between people that transcends the filters and translations of texts and bodies as media. The expression of such a desire in literary texts thematically focused on bodily experiences could suggest that empathy is a self-contradictory fantasy, relying on the very textual and bodily mediations it resists. Alternately, these representations of empathy could point toward ways that, rather than fighting against the distance and slippages of bodily and textual intercessions, empathy might embrace those realities as readers explore and reflect on bodies' and texts' permeabilities. I use the term *permeability* specifically because I wish to emphasize empathy's relationship to embodiment. Permeability carries many of the same associations as *intersubjectivity*—indeed, Edmund Husserl, a foundational theorist of empathy in its philosophical contexts, argues that intersubjective encounters, experienced bodily, form the basis of community and therefore empathy. A relational idea of subjectivity also underpins my understanding of empathy as a co-created affective experience. I use permeability rather than intersubjectivity, however, because I wish to emphasize the ways empathic intersubjectivity is physical and material as well as social,

and especially the ways the risks (and pleasures) of embodied intersubjectivity are unevenly distributed across subjects. While sexual penetration, pregnancy, and virality serve as metaphors for empathic ruptures between subjects, they are also physical realities borne disproportionately by feminized and minoritized subjects, who are in turn discursively associated with the body.[6] As P. Lealle Ruhl argues, bodies are problematic for notions of the individual going back to the Enlightenment; "[m]ost problematic for liberal theory is the 'open' body, the body that is not under the rational control of the individual. Women's bodies, with their periodic 'lapses' into pregnancy and childbirth, are quintessentially open bodies" (43). I therefore use the term *permeability* to foreground the embodied nature of intersubjectivity in the texts I examine.

Parable of the Sower explores, theorizes, and combines all three aspects of empathy. Lauren's dis/ability is an example of *communicative empathy*, since Lauren picks up others' feelings directly, bypassing the need for language. The unresolved interpretive bind into which readers are placed concerning the realness of Lauren's hyperempathy highlights the experience of *readerly empathy*: whatever a reader decides about Lauren's dis/ability has ramifications for the text ranging from characterization to setting to genre, each of which carries political weight and makes the reader complicit in the creation of the novel's story-world. Finally, *Sower*'s historical and political context makes it clear that this particular novel participates in contemporaneous political discussions about the usefulness and limits of what I am calling *affective empathy*. Published in 1993, set in Los Angeles, prominently featuring riots and fires, and narrated by a black woman purposely cultivating a racially mixed community, *Sower*

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[6] These unequally distributed permeabilities, especially because they are repurposed as metaphors by subjects who do not experience them, are reminiscent of the unequal burdens and pleasures of affective labor carried by women, people of color, and the economically disadvantaged written about by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michael Hardt, and Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, among others.

answers calls at the time by political thinkers including Cornel West and bell hooks for increased empathy, especially across racial lines.[7] Butler conducts a thought experiment by pushing affective empathy to an extreme and showing that rather than making Lauren a more politically meaningful actor or "better person," empathy frequently makes her vulnerable, isolated, and self-absorbed.

The remainder of the texts in my archive also combine different uses of empathy to varying degrees, but I have classified them according to the type of empathy they best exemplify, to discuss each aspect in turn. In selecting and combining the primary texts of this project, I have also loosely structured each chapter around broad historical-political shifts of the past fifty years.[8] I agree with Lauren Berlant that "affect, the body's active presence to the intensities of the present, embeds the subject in an historical field, and that its scholarly pursuit can communicate the conditions of an historical moment's production as a visceral moment" ("Intuitionists" 846). In her reading of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1998) and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Berlant asks, "How does a particular affective response come to be exemplary of a shared historical time, and in what terms?" (845). She goes on to "trac[k] the production of intuition as central to the historicizing sensorium" (846). Although in some uses empathy can seem transhistorical or even ahistorical, connecting anyone

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[7] In "Postmodern Blackness" (1990), hooks argues that "Radical postmodernism calls attention to those sensibilities which are shared across the boundaries of class, gender, and race, and which could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition." Similarly, in *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (1993), after asking how "a black philosopher keep[s] faith" in "this frightening moment of global cynicism and fatalism," West advocates "prophetic criticism": a "self-critical and self-corrective enterprise of human 'sense-making' for the preserving and expanding of human empathy and compassion" (xi). Butler's parable of empathy also follows closely on the heels of then presidential candidate Bill Clinton's famous assertion of empathy on the 1992 campaign trail, when he was asked what he would do about the AIDS crisis and responded "I feel your pain."

[8] Although *The Garden of Eden* was written outside of this time frame, it makes sense to consider it within the historical context of its publication in 1986. By publication date, the primary texts of this project range from 1967 to 2011.

who experiences it to any person, time, or place, in Berlant's argument *intuition*—an experience closely related to empathy—becomes a historical affect, a way to be immersed within and make sense of the present as a historical moment. Fredric Jameson's recent work on realism echoes Berlant's argument when he uses the term affect to describe "something like an unnamed emotional state that discourse has not yet captured and reified within a grid of socially recognized passions," and argues that realist writers such as Flaubert and Baudelaire indicate their attunement with such affects through their development of new styles (Blix). It follows from this understanding of affect as historical that the texts I examine here speak not only to empathy's ties to reading, embodiment, and politics generally, but also to postwar empathy's specific ties to postmodern reading, posthuman embodiment, and post-liberal humanist politics. Despite the decentering of the subject and associated waning of affect Jameson famously theorizes in his study of postmodernism, empathy persists, whether it is theorized as necessary to contemporary global politics, a painful and problematic distraction from those politics, or the experience of being attuned to the historical present's affective landscape.[9] All of these postmodern engagements with empathy track or assist its shift from describing relationships among liberal humanist individuals to naming an experience of relationality shared among posthumanist subjects, a shift registered in each of the three types of empathy I examine.

In *Sower* and elsewhere, empathy encompasses a multidirectional process of *reading*, in which people encountering one another are all senders and receivers of their co-created affective

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[9] Maureen O'Hara and Rajini Srikanth are among those who argue that empathy is more relevant and necessary than ever "at this historical moment of heterogeneous subjectivity and postmodern rejection of the Western enlightenment notion of the primacy of the rational individual," although Srikanth is careful to emphasize the asymmetry and potential for exploitation in empathic enounters (Srikanth 6). In contrast, Rebecca Wanzo's reading of *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel situates empathy in a postmodern context as damaging at the individual level and irrelevant to communal political work, arguing, "[t]he *Parable* texts teach the necessity of relegating feeling to the outskirts of personal choices in apocalyptic circumstances" (77).

states. The experience of reading literary texts can in turn be understood as a process of empathy. Becoming immersed in texts' story-worlds, caring about what happens next, or simply propelling stories onward by turning pages, are acts of empathy in that they situate readers in relation to texts, from which positions they contribute affective responses with interpretive and political stakes for the stories they co-create. Texts call for and create such contributions of readerly empathy. My first chapter, "'The Devil Things': Readerly Empathy and Dubious Consent in Post-45 Sexual Violence Literature," reads three stories of ambiguous sexual violence for what they suggest about readerly empathy, and specifically readerly consent and complicity. Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (1986), Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), and the video game *Heavy Rain* (2010), written and directed by David Cage and produced by Quantic Dream, present sexual encounters that can be understood alternately as rape, or as consensual "rape play." The murky line between abuse and kink is one cultivated not only by perpetrators of sexual violence, but also by BDSM practitioners who play with variations on consent, and by some anti-kink feminist theorists. While not focused on a specific historical moment, this chapter and its archive are informed by debates within BDSM communities and the feminist "sex war" debates of the 1980s, as well as by more recent feminist thought on agency in a post-humanist context. Readers of these novels (and players of this game) are handed the politically fraught tasks of making determinations of consent while reading, and reflecting upon readerly complicity in co-creating and sanctioning acts of sexual violence or violent sex. The chapter ends with possibilities for making peace with the difficulties of readerly empathy in light of the inevitably political nature of any interpretive stance a reader might take.

In its popular usage, affective empathy is assumed to be a political good, and sometimes even a prerequisite to political action, but properly understood, affective empathy is politically dubious. Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim argue that empathy and sympathy are "politically dangerous precisely because they appear to be ethically good" (9). Dennis A. Lynch summarizes one of the political challenges of empathy partly using the metaphor of standing in someone else's shoes: "[W]hat could be more colonizing than the effort to get inside the perspective—or lifeworld—of another person?… When we desire to step into the shoes of someone else… it is only possible if those shoes are empty; this desire makes empathy dependent on the physical, bodily displacement of the other" (9-10). Empathy is also politically fraught in the other direction, however, from the empathized with to the empathizer, because empathy enrolls the reader/empathizer into a position of judgment or complicity with the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the read/empathized with. My second chapter, "'Voices From Inside this Nowhere Place': Affective Empathy and the Politics of Projection in Post-45 Pregnancy Literature," examines three representations of pregnancy for the ways they complicate the process of projection involved in affective empathy. Anti-abortion activists and legislators have long sought to create affective empathy with fetuses, the assumption being that such empathy leads people to support anti-abortion policies. This chapter examines three novels that grapple with the challenges of representing fetuses while (explicitly or implicitly) supporting women's reproductive rights. The settings and publication dates of Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), and Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003) span the years before and after the widespread adoption of fetal ultrasound examinations, and key American and Canadian legal decisions concerning pregnancy and abortion. Engaging the

political perils of affective empathy, these novels take up the paradoxes and difficulties of representing fetal characters without doing rhetorical harm to pregnant characters. Readers of these novels are presented with interpretive challenges surrounding the visualization, privacy, and temporality of pregnancy narratives. In the process, readers are asked to consider the political stakes of empathy with pregnant and fetal characters, and the question of whether representation inevitably produces empathy.

My third chapter, "'A Psychic Epidemic': Communicative Empathy and Narrating Perspective in Post-45 Viral Literature," examines representations of virality for what they suggest about the relationship between empathy and linguistic communication. Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1985), and China Miéville's *Embassytown* (2011) all provide examples of the science fictional trope of communicative empathy by creating experiences of group consciousness that are spread and experienced virally. I place these novels within the historical context of the rise of what N. Katherine Hayles names the *information narrative*. These texts demonstrate some of the ramifications of that cultural narrative for identity politics in contexts as varied as the Black Arts Movement and transhumanist Singularity stories. By employing the SF trope of communicative empathy, this archive explores the relationship between empathy and language, asking whether empathy replaces, underwrites, perfects, renders obsolete, or exists on a continuum with linguistic communication. Readers of these texts are

asked to interrogate our own embeddedness within language, and the perspectives and positions we bring to experiences of empathy informed by that embeddedness.[10]

Drawing from affect studies, feminist and trans* theory, and studies of gender and embodiment, I place the feminized experiences of sexual violence, pregnancy, and virality in conversation with one another because they stage bodily and psychic ruptures moving in three directions. I theorize sexual vulnerability as an inward facing rupture of two becoming one, pregnancy as an outward facing rupture of one becoming two, and mass virality as an all-encompassing rupture of everyone becoming everyone. Together these ruptures destabilize any remaining notions of liberal humanist subjectivity—self-contained, inviolable, and self-constituting—upon which ideas of empathy were originally predicated. Despite empathy's origins within liberal humanism, understanding reading as an empathic project—and empathy as a reading project—supports post-Enlightenment notions of subjectivity as contingent, shifting, constituted, and relational. While it is currently popular to claim that reading makes people more empathic (and, implicitly, that reading and empathy are intrinsically politically good),[11] I propose a different relationship and political value for reading and empathy. Reading does not make people empathic, and consequently altruistic and politically active; rather, reading is a form and practice of empathy as a mutually created, permeable, affective state. Literary narrative functions

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[10] Throughout this dissertation, I occasionally use the first person plural, especially when referring to "readers." This construction strikes me as the best of several problematic options. Referring to readers as "they" or "you" exempts myself from the experiences I describe and theorize. Similarly, writing about what "one" encounters in literature seems to make unsupportable presumptions about what some vague, faceless reader out there is thinking. Passive voice constructions avoid the problem by pretending there is no reading subject at all. While I could use "I," the reading experiences I discuss are more broadly generalizable than the first person singular would suggest, even if they do not apply perfectly to every reader. Indeed, part of what I hope to gesture toward with my use of "we" is precisely its coercive nature, the discomfort of being hailed as part of a reading community or placed in an empathic situation without our full assent or in spite of an imperfect fit. This issue comes up in chapters one and two but is especially pertinent to chapter three.

[11] See, for example, popular coverage of a study of reading and Theory of Mind published in *Science* in 2013, including articles by Pam Belluck, Gabe Bergado, Liz Bury, Julianne Chiaet, and Mark O'Connell in *The New York Times*, *Mic*, *The Guardian*, *Scientific American*, and *Slate*.

as a laboratory in which readers practice empathy's specific techniques and variations, untangling and becoming tangled in its problems and impossibilities. I begin my exploration of these empathetic challenges with a novel that asks readers to become entangled with a monster: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955).

"The Devil Things": Readerly Empathy and Dubious Consent in Post-45 Sexual Violence Literature

One of the most famous unreliable narrators in American literature is Humbert Humbert, the undeniably monstrous but oddly endearing child molester protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). Because he tells his own story in the first person, readers are perhaps less likely than they would be otherwise to realize the full extent of his crimes; his "fancy prose style" also camouflages his actions and makes him especially sympathetic to certain erudite readers (9). Even though hints slip through in the narration—Dolores is clearly in pain at times, one of Humbert's favorite images of her includes her tear-matted eyelashes, and she hoards money and flees from Humbert when she gets the chance—Nabokov and Humbert make very little room in the novel for readers to get to know Dolores Haze (140-1, 64, 184, 246).

It is partly because of the masterfully deceptive writing of the novel that upon its initial publication some critics and scholars had little sympathy for Dolores, even labeling her "depraved," blaming her for being a "self-offered target for lechers," calling her a "demonic rapist of the soul," or characterizing *Lolita* as a novel about "the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl" (Hutchens 13, Molnar 69, Fiedler 335, *Ibid*). As mores changed and the text was revisited by feminist critics, Dolores was reread, now as a helpless child, a spoiled innocent, and a symbol to be re-victimized by her appropriations into mass culture.[12] Although she certainly was the victim of rape and kidnapping by any contemporary definition, those events alone do not define a character's personality, and so some scholars have since sought to find a truer, more three-dimensional picture of Dolores buried within the details the text provides, an

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[12] See for example Linda Kauffman and Elizabeth Patnoe.

effort Julian Connolly highlights and contributes to in *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's Lolita* (2009) by piecing together and examining the moments in which Dolores speaks for herself. (Often Humbert summarizes or paraphrases her speech, a revisionist gesture that undoubtedly contributes to any sense readers might have of Dolores as a depraved seductress of helpless middle-aged men.) Through this kind of recovery project, which turns the text into an archaeological dig and Dolores's true self into an elusive, perhaps mythical, buried treasure, it might be possible for readers to understand this character as a multidimensional fictional person —neither corrupting mastermind nor merely victim, but a fairly typical prepubescent girl who is forever changed by her stepfather's abuse.

While probably the fairest approach to Dolores Haze of the three broadly sketched readings I've outlined, even this recovery project is hopelessly flawed. Addressing readers as "[f]rigid gentlewomen of the jury" (132), Humbert tells us only what he wants us to know—details that seem to slip in despite his best efforts might actually be intentional, and readers must make determinations and guesses about the accuracy of *anything* included in his story. One famous reading of the novel makes Quilty, or at least his murder, Humbert's invention.[13] Once presented with this theory, students have asked me how we really know how Charlotte dies (maybe Humbert really does drown her in Hourglass Lake, as he contemplates a few short pages before her car accident), and have suggested that Humbert fabricates Dolores's sexual experiences at summer camp (86-7, 132-3). There is also so little given about Dolores's personality and relationships outside of her family that any assertions readers can make about her character are trivial—she has a sweet tooth, hates to bathe, excels at tennis, and enjoys comic

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[13] See for example Elizabeth Bruss, and Christina Tekiner.

books and movies—or guesswork (148, 51, 232-3, 42, 170). Are readers of *Lolita* guilty of one of the same crimes Humbert commits, then, seeing in Dolores Haze what we want to see rather than her authentic self? Can it ever possibly be otherwise with such an unreliable narrator and such a slippery text?

Beyond this difficulty of characterization, I would argue that readers are further complicit in Humbert's abuse—are *made* complicit in Humbert's abuse—through the very structures and expectations of storytelling itself. I assume that most readers of *Lolita* would say they wish Dolores well. But when reading a novel, readers want the story to progress. We want tension and conflict. We even, to a certain extent, want characters to get what they desire, if only to see what happens next. Narrative (especially first person narrative) is set up in such a way as to make readers follow protagonists' actions, even when we do not approve of them, and we propel the story onward simply by turning pages. If Humbert never gets what he wants, there is no story. By wanting the story to go on, readers in effect want Humbert to rape his twelve-year-old stepdaughter. The question, then, is whether readers are guilty of some ethical or political lapse simply by reading, whether we are complicit in crimes we read about by virtue of wanting them to happen for our entertainment.[14] One relationship frequently posited between reading and empathy is that reading makes people more empathetic and therefore better people—more perceptive, compassionate, and altruistic. But what about reading that makes us empathize with the wrong people? What about texts designed for this very purpose?

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[14] Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne present this dilemma in their study of literary representations of rape, arguing that while "[f]or second-wave feminism the primary objective was to put rape on the agenda in an effort to prevent it from occurring" the question now is "not just whether we speak about rape or not, but *how* we speak about rape and to what end" (3).

Some scholars of *Lolita* have focused on the extent to which the novel functions as a puzzle to be solved or a code to be cracked, its rhetorical devices letting readers "witness the subtle art of an author playing chess against himself" (Tamir-Ghez 66). While critics like Nomi Tamir-Ghez, Trevor McNeely, and Michael Wood have noted the eerie way readers are made to see things through Humbert's perspective, they have simultaneously noted that *Lolita* never lets readers forget its own art and artifice, its status as a masterfully constructed piece of storytelling with an authorial presence separate from that of its protagonist-narrator. This hypermediacy serves both to cultivate and mitigate any empathy readers might be inclined to feel for Humbert. Rebecca N. Mitchell argues that "Humbert's narrative voice does recount his attempts to imagine his actions from another's perspective throughout the novel; that the reader could respond to his narcissistic overtures speaks to the power of readerly investment and the primacy of the longing to connect and feel oneself reflected accurately in the mind of the other" (124). The experience of reading *Lolita*, as described by these critics, is one of becoming unwittingly invested in Humbert, feeling a certain discomfort with that emotional attachment, and recognizing the literary strategies that produce those responses all at once.

We can look to a novel like *American Psycho* (1991), published four decades later, for similar mechanisms of hypermediacy at work, mechanisms that also keep readers aware of the empathetic effects they produce even as they produce them. Bret Easton Ellis's vividly detailed story of yuppie serial killer Patrick Bateman is reminiscent of *Lolita* in several ways: it caused an uproar upon its publication, it faces charges of obscenity and pornography to this day, its social commentary is achieved partly through the inclusion of popular culture minutiae, and its first person narrator is an objectively horrible person. But *American Psycho*'s highly visible rhetorical

devices are used not to cultivate sneaking identification and understanding for Bateman, but instead to produce stark alienation and disgust. The interpretive dilemmas surrounding *Lolita*—to what extent the first-person narration distorts readers' accurate judgments of the events of the story—do not apply here. Although *American Psycho* is also written in the first person, the literary "strateg[ies] used by Ellis to stress that in Bateman's actions there is neither cause nor consequence" serve to distance readers from Bateman rather than draw us in (Weinreich 75). The dilemma of *American Psycho* is instead purely affective: how are readers supposed to feel while reading the novel's grisly descriptions of decapitation, necrophilia, and cannibalism?

As David Eldridge argues, "A key difficulty with [*American Psycho*] is that it aggressively requires the reader to provide the critical condemnation of Bateman's attitude and actions—for, in the first-person narrative, no such condemnation can be found" (24). Despite the text's seeming requirement that readers provide the disgust and moral judgment of which Bateman is incapable, the outrage surrounding the book's publication (and later adaptation into a film) point to a cultural anxiety that readers will fail to fulfill this obligation. The National Organization for Women, calling the novel a "'how-to-manual' on the 'torture and dismemberment of women,'" called for a boycott of Simon and Schuster before they had even published the book (resulting in Simon and Schuster dropping the book and Random House picking it up); Roger Rosenblatt, writing for the *New York Times*, urged readers to "snuff this book" (qtd. in Eldridge 20). Despite the novel's lack of any attempt to cultivate reader identification or affective empathy with Bateman, many of those who condemned *American Psycho* to the point of insisting it not be read seemed to assume that readers would nevertheless be influenced by the book—not necessarily to emulate the killer's behavior, but, more vaguely,

to think and feel dangerous things. Because of the distance this novel establishes between Bateman and readers, regardless of the gruesome violence it contains, it strikes me as a far less "dangerous" book than *Lolita*, which some critics to this day hesitate to say depicts rape.[15] What the debate over *American Psycho* suggests is that even when readers are not called upon to empathize with fictional characters—or when we resist such a call—the relationship between reader and *text* is powerful, political, and empathetic. Is affectively distancing ourselves from Bateman and Humbert enough, or does the very act of becoming entangled in their texts make us somehow guilty by association?

Entanglement and Complicity

In this chapter, I examine textual gray areas between violent sex and sexualized violence as a test case for *readerly empathy*, that experience of entanglement between text and reader that gives reading its political stakes. The primary texts I examine in this chapter represent relationships that can be interpreted as sexual assault but do not have to be. These representations of *dubious consent* highlight several political and ethical challenges within the concept of consent itself: the slipperiness of texts and bodies as legible objects, the loopholes and blind spots in legal and discursive definitions of consent, and the role readers play in granting or denying consent. Dolores Haze's unreadability as a character begins to demonstrate the kind of semantic slipperiness at work in such literature. We might also ask if her relationship with Humbert changes in legal status as she ages and they cross state borders, and how any change in legality impacts the nature of their relationship. The changing reception of the novel also highlights the

[15] Brian Boyd is one such critic; also see David Larmour for a survey of others reluctant to label Humbert a rapist.

role readers play not merely in determining consent but in *creating* it: when, where, and by whom the novel is read determines whether or not it depicts rape. In the texts that follow, these challenges to consent are explored even more extensively, and the events and relationships to which they apply are left even more ambiguous.

Literature representing dubious consent provides unique opportunities for exploring the politics of readerly entanglement and complicity, but the issues that emerge in such literature carry broad implications for reading any fiction. Reading is often described in penetrative terms, and the delight that reading produces is almost libidinal: readers curl up with books, open them, dive into them, consume them, immerse ourselves within them. Books in turn are said to become part of their readers, to pierce us, move us, haunt us. The question of consent in reading arises not only when we read things never "meant" to be read—posthumously published diaries and letters, early drafts, banned books—but also when we do things with texts perhaps not sanctioned by them or their authors. Readers might "violate" or "betray" a book by reading it against the grain, translating it, adapting it, repurposing it, or writing fan fiction. Conversely, books might violate or betray their readers by not delivering on their promises, not fulfilling the implicit contracts they establish around issues such as plot resolution, character believability, generic conventions, or affective payoff—or, Iser argues, by fulfilling their contracts too well, leaving no room for surprise and resulting in bored readers (283). Even more dramatically, books can traumatize or re-traumatize their readers.

For those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a wide variety of everyday encounters, including encounters with language, can act as triggers, causing people to relive past trauma. Even people not suffering from PTSD might find reading about certain acts unsettling

and haunting to the point of being felt as trauma: Chuck Palahniuk (rather proudly) asserts that public readings of his horror story "Guts" (2005) have been responsible for 67 listeners fainting. "Only books have that power," Palahniuk claims. Readers therefore face an extreme decision with regard to the texts they read: at any point they can choose to walk away from a book, but by doing so they cease to be readers. If they choose to say, in a sense they give up much of their agency regarding what happens next. Viewed this way, reading is very much like the BDSM practice of "consensual nonconsent." Scenes of this type "play with" real life scenarios of nonconsent, including slavery, abduction, and rape, but are entered into willingly by their participants after negotiation. The participants do not and cannot consent in advance to everything that might happen during the scene, but they agree to that very lack of foreknowledge and control (Weiss 20-1). In many cases, before reading a book we don't know the events of a story, the characters we will be asked to get to know, or the political issues with which we will be confronted, but we consent to that not knowing. We agree that for the length of the text someone else makes those decisions, and what's more, a great deal of the pleasure of reading comes out of that lack of knowledge and control. (Students who request trigger warnings on course content are pointing not only to the potentially traumatic effects of reading certain things, but to the lack of consent they have in that encounter, and they are rejecting a reading relationship of consensual nonconsent. In the context of a text required by a course, students have even less agency than other readers do to use their "safe word" by walking away from the book.)

Examining the difficulties of consent in textual content as well as the reading relationship carries immense political, affective, and practical consequences. Any ambiguities in determining what constitutes rape and how we know when it has occurred are dangerous to admit and name,

let alone to work through. On the one hand, the ideology of rape culture looks for ways to dismiss and justify sexual assault, and seeks to blame victims for their own abuse (Gunne and Thompson 7-11). On the other hand, responses to that culture are at times so black-and-white that, for some people and some circumstances, they becomes inaccurate, and proscriptive rather than descriptive. Is a wife who believes it's her duty to be always sexually available to her husband, regardless of her own desires, being abused? If a rape victim blames himself for his assault as a way of feeling empowered and in control, is it helpful to try to convince him he was blameless? When two sexual partners are drunk, and no one can legally consent, are they both guilty of rape? I posit these hypothetical scenarios only to show some of the possible areas of ambiguity in discussions of sexual assault: the (presumably agreed to) rules of some relationships within which such assaults might occur, the victim's subjective experience and interpretation of the events in question, and the flaws within the legal concept of consent itself.[16] These ambiguities carry over to literary representations of potential sexual assault, and overlap with the problems of consent in the reading relationship, because all are situations involving interpretation—or "reading."

These same issues come up in theorizations of BDSM practices and relationships, another set of discussions that highlights and explores difficulties within the concept of consent. Debates around BDSM, like those around sexual assault, can also exhibit some dangerous black-and-white rhetoric. On the one hand, some who are anti-kink, whether for moral or political reasons, too easily conflate consensual sexual practices that include violence, bondage, or degradation with "real world" nonconsensual violence and oppression. Anti-porn feminists during the "sex

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[16] See Jenny Kutner, Anna March, and Laura Sessions Stepp for accounts of sexual encounters that potential victims do not classify as assault but instead say fall into a gray area between consensual and nonconsensual.

wars" of the 1980s, for example, contended that BDSM reinforces patriarchy and condones violence against women, and that women who claim to enjoy BDSM are experiencing false consciousness (Barry, Russell). These arguments have been resurrected recently in some responses to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels and film (2011-2015) (Alibhai-Brown; Green; Clark-Flory; Bonomi, Altenburger, and Walton). On the other hand, some defenders and practitioners of BDSM go to the opposite extreme, insisting that BDSM is pure fantasy, completely removed from the "real world," and is even utopian in its radical transformations of power, control, and pain. Lewis Call, for example, argues that "erotic power exchange and consensual slavery" in African-American fiction can "begin healing the wounds" of nonconsensual slavery ("Structures" 276-7) and Bonnie Shullenberger argues that sadomasochism provides a replacement spirituality "in a world where God is dead" (249). Again at issue in this debate (as in discussions of unclear cases of sexual assault) are relationship rules, the subjective experiences of participants, and definitions of consent, as they intersect and interact with larger systems of power. Literary texts that explore these concerns in the relatively safe space of fiction can suggest ways to engage ambiguities of consent in the "real world." They can also expand and complicate the experience of readerly empathy in politically important ways, by dramatizing the difficulties of interpreting consent, the flaws embedded within the concept itself, and the role of the reader in creating consent.

In light of these political difficulties surrounding consent, for reading as well as in the "real world," this chapter investigates the following questions: what are the implications if we interpret dubiously consensual fictional acts and relationships as consensual or as nonconsensual, and what factors influence those interpretive decisions? Are readers necessarily complicit in the

acts about which they read? If so, do authors have political obligations concerning the reading relationships they create? Are there certain reading practices and relationships that are politically "better" or "worse"? The ambiguous texts of this chapter facilitate an investigation of readerly empathy's relationship to consent through their textual instabilities and selective silences.[17] This is a chapter about such failures of communication within possible rape stories: unreliable narrators, imperfect readers, and inadequate language. How much can readerly empathy fill in the gaps left by failed or flawed language, and how much should it? What conclusions can be reached even despite those failures—and how much can they be trusted? Texts and bodies are similarly permeable in these narratives, and the interpretive leaps made by characters in determining and labeling consent serve to highlight those made by readers.

I begin this investigation by posing the empathetic problem of unreadable bodies and texts through an examination of Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (1986). The events and characters of this novel ask us to consider what determinations of desire and consent can be made when someone is unable or unwilling to communicate that desire, or gives multiple, contradictory affirmations and denials of consent. The text(s) of this novel expand this investigation outward, posing the same dilemma for *Garden*'s readers: what interpretive decisions can a reader come to when a text is thoroughly ambiguous, equally supporting divergent readings and existing in multiple, contradictory versions? Furthermore, what is a reader to do when any possible option among various interpretive stances carries the potential for doing discursive harm?

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[17] Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver take such silences as one of their primary concerns in their study of rape in literature, investigating how the "undecidability" at the heart of many rape cases may lead to a lack of representation, a "disappearance of rape from the social text" that has made rape plots "unreadab[le]" (2).

Next I move to a reading of Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), which further destabilizes determinations of consent by deconstructing the core of the concept. Consent and agency are rooted in a liberal humanist understanding of the individual as a self-constituting, rational, and autonomous free agent. If that understanding of the subject loses traction and applicability in a post-humanist world, can any person or character properly be said to freely give uninfluenced, rationally self-interested consent? If we have reached the point where we acknowledge that all consent is tainted by the structures and relationships surrounding it, characters invested in obtaining consent from their partners face a political and personal dilemma—as do readers who wish to negotiate consent in their empathic relationships with texts.

After tracing the difficulties of readerly empathy between text and reader in these two novels, I turn to an even more extreme entanglement of reader with text in a video game explicitly designed to create a challenging empathetic relationship: Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* (2010). This game especially highlights the role that readers play in determining *and creating* consent. It is not merely that by asking for consent readers create the conditions for its granting. It is also the case that any act of interpretation on the part of a reader becomes part of the text itself. Reading is not merely a passively receptive act but a co-creation of meaning—a negotiation especially apparent in more overtly interactive media, like video games. Given this interactive understanding of reading, can a reader simply manufacture consent by choosing to read it into a text or person? Once again we arrive at a place where readers, by dint of their empathetic relationships, might actually perpetrate interpretive crimes comparable to Humbert's.

All three of these texts present sexual scenarios that could be considered either consensual or nonconsensual, but the texts themselves never apply either label. They also

foreground the role of reading and interpretation in determining truth and desire, each exploring different political problems faced by readers as they become entangled with ambiguous texts—and with characters who may or may not be rapists. Further complicating the usual discourses surrounding rape, two of the three potential rapists are women, and two of the three potential victims are men; all of the potential rapes occur within intimate relationships. As Sonia Saraiya argues in her reading of humorous rape stories on the television shows *Broad City* (2014) and *Shameless* (U.S., 2011), both of which feature female perpetrators and arguably portray gray areas of dubious consent, because the potential rapists on both shows are women, "the reversal of expectations is so marked that it makes you do a double take." Similarly, the reversal of expected genders is just one way the texts of this chapter create a jarring, uncomfortable reading experience, and call attention to the challenges surrounding consent that we might not otherwise see. Collectively, the readings of this chapter provide a test case for readerly empathy that reveals the gravity of its political stakes. They also gesture toward possibilities for reading practices that do not eschew a relationship of entanglement, but remain attentive to the politics and repercussions of readers' affective and interpretive encounters with texts.

Sympathy for the Devil: *The Garden of Eden*

Like *Lolita*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (1986)[18] features a relationship defined by dubious consent, and therefore asks readers to make political determinations about the motives and actions of its characters. Unlike *Lolita, The Garden of Eden* is written in third-person close narration, and the focalizing character is the potential victim of assault, not the perpetrator. This

[18] Hemingway began working on *Garden* in 1946 and likely continued working on it over the next fifteen years until his death in 1961. The novel was published posthumously in 1986.

greater distance between the possible assailant and readers does not clear up ambiguity, however. Instead, our access to all characters' inner lives is limited, and we are not compensated with an omniscient perspective that would supposedly give an accurate account of what happens. The novel's voice prevents readers from fully understanding either the objective events of the story or the subjective sense characters make of them.

In *The Garden of Eden*, newlyweds David and Catherine Bourne embark on a series of sexual experiments with gender fluidity and nonmonogamy—experiments to which David may not fully consent, and about which he is troublingly quiet despite being the narrative's focalizer. Catherine faces an interpretive dilemma: she believes she knows what David wants—or what he may not want but will nonetheless enjoy and be glad they have done after the fact. She acts on those presumptions throughout the novel, sometimes gaining David's reluctant consent through persistence, sometimes acting before or without asking, and sometimes acting in direct contradiction to his stated wishes. Her actions range from cutting her hair to match his, to asking him to go by a woman's name in bed and call her by a man's name, to anally penetrating him, to inviting another woman into their relationship. David's emotional responses to these events include excitement, arousal, shame, remorse, discomfort, anger, and fear—and these reactions often occur several together or change over time. By the end of the novel in its published form, Catherine (who David nicknames "Devil," and whose sexual practices he refers to as "the devil things") is arguably represented as villainous: her impulsiveness, selfishness, and vacillating moods increasingly mark her as mentally ill, and the vaguely happy ending of the story is that Catherine leaves and David stays with Marita, the woman Catherine has procured for them.

Catherine's interpretive dilemma is one the reader shares; David's true desires are as difficult for readers to decipher as they are for Catherine. Penetration occurs and fails to occur across multiple registers in *Garden*: it is sexual and textual, affective and interpretive. Although his physical penetration is a central concern of the novel, David remains emotionally impenetrable. He is frustratingly vague and contradictory in his responses to Catherine, and frequently we read about his feelings without clear referent to specific actions or events that trigger them. Once when Catherine "changes" into a boy for a sexual game, we read, "He shut his eyes and did not think and she kissed him and it had gone further now and he could tell and feel the desperateness," but it's never clear exactly how this specific incident "had gone further" than any other, or what made him feel whose desperateness (56). Similarly, after one sexual encounter in Madrid, a morning out together begins nicely, "but remorse had been there to meet him in the [Buen Retiro Park]" (68). It is again unclear what triggers David's feelings of remorse in the park, or later in the day when he says his absinthe "tastes exactly like remorse" (69). David later refers back to "the Madrid part" as a stand-in for the unnamed thing that caused his remorse, similarly to the way he and Catherine talk about "[t]he way it was in Grau du Roi the first time it ever happened" (185, 168). It remains unclear how successfully Catherine emotionally penetrates David, but it is clear enough in the Grau du Roi scene that she does physically penetrate him (18). Readers, conversely, have access to some of David's feelings but fewer physical details when David uses those feelings as code words for unspecified sexual acts.

Because of these omissions, it is often difficult to determine exactly what is happening in this book, physically or emotionally. Readers are called on to make such determinations through inference and speculation when characters' desires are left unspoken or have multiple possible

interpretations. In one of several moments in which free indirect discourse slides into first person, David says to himself, “[W]hat will become of us if things have gone this wildly and this dangerously and this fast? What can there be that will not burn out in a fire that rages like that? We were happy and I am sure she was happy. But who ever knows?” (21). Not only is David unsure of their happiness prior to their new sexual games, he can’t decide if he is happy now that they have started. He continues expressing this ambivalence: “And who are you to judge and who participated and who accepted the change and lived it? If that is what she wants who are you not to wish her to have it? You’re lucky to have a wife like her and a sin is what you feel bad after and you don’t feel bad. Not with the wine you don’t feel bad, he told himself, and what will you drink when the wine won’t cover for you?” (21). Even at this moment when we have access to David’s thoughts, he appears to be talking himself into and out of enjoyment and rejection of what he and Catherine have done.

In other scenes readers have no access to David’s thoughts, and his ambivalence comes through in his actions. After one of Catherine’s haircuts (her hair gets progressively shorter and more masculine throughout the book) it is clear by her reaction to David’s reaction that he does not like it: “‘Oh, no,’ she said. ‘No.’ Then she was on the bed pushing her head against him saying, ‘No. No. Please David. Don’t you at all?’” Within a few lines of dialogue it is clear that after his initial reaction, David is sexually aroused by the haircut as well: Catherine asks if she can tell him the story of her haircut in bed and he asks her to “hurry” (45). Much later, Catherine tells David she wants to make him happy like the first time in Grau du Roi. He asks, “How happy?,” she replies, “This,” and he says, “Be careful” (168). At this moment and as the scene continues, it is unclear to readers and perhaps to Catherine whether David wants to participate or

is simply going along with what Catherine wants, and what exactly he means by "be careful"; it is also unclear what actually happens in this scene and whether it does make him happy, leaving David textually impenetrable even if physically penetrated.

These scenes provide only a few examples of the indeterminacy that structures the moments of intimacy in *Garden*. Readers, through the novel's narrative and stylistic choices, are placed in a position from which they must make the same interpretive leaps Catherine does, and risk repeating her (possible) mistakes. The range of opinions voiced by critics of this novel bear out the interpretive dilemmas. Depending how we read this book, it could be the story of dangerous sexual games initiated by a gender-confused, mentally unstable, jealous and vindictive woman, and reluctantly participated in by a man pushed into passivity and helplessness in the face of his wife's deteriorating mental state.[19] After all, in addition to David calling Catherine "sick" and "crazy" (152, 194, 223), she describes herself as "destructive," "a tragic bully," and "a bitch" (5, 193, 210); she has sex with Marita after David unequivocally says he does not want her to (115); and in a final act of violation, she burns the stories he has been writing (216-19). Meanwhile, David's participation in the sex scenes is often described in terms of "let[ting] it happen" or "not say[ing] no" (18, 20). After their first gender-reversal incident, while lying in bed, David's "heart said goodbye Catherine goodbye my lovely girl goodbye and good luck and goodbye," and after Catherine has pushed him into cutting his hair to match hers he sees how happy she is and thinks about "what a completely stupid thing he had permitted," all suggesting that David sees himself as a helpless bystander or unwitting accomplice (18, 178).

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[19] Robert E. Fleming reads the novel this way, as does Charles Scribner, who articulates this interpretation of Catherine in the preface to the published book, writing that *Garden* "presents an intensive study of the mental state of an intelligent woman uncontrollably envious of her husband's success as a writer and yearning to change her gender" (viii).

Alternately, however, *Garden* can be read as the story of a man who secretly enjoys playing gender-reversal games but cannot articulate his desires out of shame or fear, and the intuitive woman who draws those desires out of him, gives him permission to explore them, realizes in the process that she does not share his proclivities, and so makes a sacrifice for the sake of his happiness by finding him a new partner to take her place.[20] Supporting this reading, Catherine repeatedly claims that she has to do what she does for David, for both of them, and later for David and Marita (12, 37, 196), and as their games progress she protests that she has had to "wrench [her]self around and tear [her]self in two," going back and forth between being a girl and a boy "because [David] can't make up [his] mind" and "won't stay with anything" (70). She explains to Marita why she is more compatible with David than Catherine was, saying, "I broke myself in pieces in Madrid to be a girl and all it did was break me in pieces. … Now all I am is through. You're a girl and a boy both and you really are. You don't have to change and it doesn't kill you and I'm not. And now I'm nothing. All I wanted was for David and you to be happy" (192). Furthermore, in several places it seems that whatever negative feelings David has about their gender-reversal games stem from his fear of public perceptions: Catherine reassures him, "Nobody can tell which way I am but us. I'll only be a boy at night and won't embarrass you. Don't worry about it please," and David tells a close friend who knows what they've been doing that he is very happy (56, 65). After Catherine has pushed him into the matching haircuts, he does think it was a stupid decision, but once alone he stands at the mirror and talks to himself:

> He asked the mirror. "How do you feel? Say it."

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[20] The critics who come closest to this reading of Catherine are Debra A. Moddelmog, who argues that over the course of the text Catherine comes to realize she is a lesbian, and Rose Marie Burwell, who notes that in the published novel David seems to be pushed into the sexual games by Catherine but in the manuscripts he is more of a willing partner (*Postwar* 104).

> "You like it," he said.
>
> He looked at the mirror and it was someone else he saw but it was less strange now. "All right. You like it," he said. "Now go through with the rest of it whatever it is and don't ever say anyone tempted you or that anyone bitched you." (84)

Finally, when they first see Marita—who is with another woman, wears a short, masculine hairstyle, and asks Catherine where she got the men's pants she is wearing—Catherine is the one who approaches her and asks her to stay with them, but only after David cannot stop talking about how attractive she is (89).

These are perhaps the two most extreme readings of the novel (Catherine as bullying villain or Catherine as self-sacrificing wife), and obviously *Garden* can be read with more nuance somewhere in the middle, but the text supports both ends of this spectrum.[21] The danger highlighted by these possibilities is not only that we might get it wrong, but that we might get it *right*—that acting in contrast to David's stated wishes is actually what he wants. Reaching such a conclusion is uncomfortable to say the least, because it puts readers in a position where they are making the same kinds of claims rapists routinely make, namely, that David was asking for it.

How we read the novel depends on which moments we find the most reliable and important, but also on which text we actually read. The published novel is vague, and enacts illegibility at the level of its readership as well as within David and Catherine's relationship. But the plot thickens when we consider the unpublished manuscripts as part of the "text." *The Garden of Eden* has a famously contentious publication history: the posthumously published

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[21] For more nuanced interpretations of Catherine, see Rose Marie Burwell, who argues that Catherine represents both a facet of David's consciousness obsessed with androgyny's potential to spur creativity, and "the most complex characterization of the novel" ("Resistance" 202), and Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes, who argue, "In Hemingway's garden the women follow Eve's pattern, seeking forbidden knowledge, and the men follow the women more cautiously, seeking new sensations, though they are a little leery of them" (59).

250-page novel cuts over a thousand pages from the manuscripts, including additional scenes in the triad's relationship, explicit language that clarifies some confusing moments, and secondary characters and subplots. The question of what material "counts" as *The Garden of Eden* makes readers' task that much more daunting. Where the versions of the novel are contradictory, what takes precedence? Is it possible to combine all *Garden* material into one "text?"

These questions apply to any text existing in multiple versions, but in the case of *Garden*, there are also barriers to access that add to the impenetrability of the "text." It is impossible to read the excised material without traveling to the archives where they are stored, at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, adding to the interpretive burden placed on readers who wish to consider the novel in its entirety, and further complicating the issue of deciding among the different readings I described above. Anyone who has done archival work is familiar with the barriers to access in costs, logistics, time, and credentials. In the case of the Hemingway archives, there are also tight restrictions governing any use of the materials; these restrictions are variously set by the Hemingway family, the Hemingway Foundation, and the Kennedy Library, and have changed over the life of the archive. While reading these manuscripts I was aware that the closely-guarded pages in front of me were very intentionally not for everyone, while the paperback I compared them to was available to anyone with fourteen dollars. In short, you, dear reader, are not supposed to know the secrets of this book unless you learn them firsthand.[22]

In addition to these barriers to access, the manuscripts present their own interpretive challenges. First is the sheer mass of material: eight manuscript boxes, each box full of folders, each folder full of papers, some duplicates or fragments, some with detailed editorial

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[22] Moddelmog makes the same point about the "Herculean effort" and "sizable bankroll" required to read the *Garden* manuscripts (90).

descriptions and some without, some typed and many more handwritten, some with annotations in Hemingway's handwriting and others', one page actually scanned backwards and therefore unreadable. Add to the quantity and palimpsestic nature of the manuscripts the facts that it is currently forbidden to make copies or take photographs, and that the manuscripts move through the events of the story in a different order from the published novel, sometimes with events or bits of dialogue happening in different physical and textual locations than those in the published version, and comparison across versions becomes difficult to say the least. Finally, consider that there are multiple "provisional" endings within the manuscripts, and it is unclear if they are to be read all together, in a series of final vignettes, or as alternatives. While it is certainly possible to read through this mass of material, it is less possible to feel certain of having penetrated it—of having fully grasped the book and emerged with a definitive reading—even if a definitive reading were possible for a text existing in multiple versions. *Garden* resists easy conclusions that the manuscripts should be prioritized because the published version distorts them (which is certainly true), or that the published version should be prioritized because it streamlines the narrative and is the only version accessible to most of the reading public (which is also certainly true). These arguments can always arise about posthumously edited texts, but *Garden*'s specific challenges add to the sense that they are especially irresolvable for this text.

One reader who does seem to feel he has successfully penetrated *The Garden of Eden* manuscripts is Tom Jenks, the editor of the published version, who claims he "went as deeply inside the book as it's possible to go into another man's work" (32). In the published version of *Garden*, Jenks made significant and, it could be argued, egregious changes to the manuscripts. In remarks he made to the MLA in 1986 about his editorial process, Jenks seems perplexed that

there could be any question about or controversy over the changes he made, describing his method as "magical," and suggesting that he channeled Hemingway and made only edits of which he would approve (32). Jenks explains that he took on the project because he wanted it to be "a book that wouldn't require an introduction by way of explanation, or footnotes, or any other mediation between the author and his readers" (30). He apologizes, "I'm not sure that I could, even if I wanted, recreate for anyone the process through which I edited *The Garden of Eden*. The book, its author did pass through me in a powerful and intimate way. … Gradually, all fell away except the man himself and, in a way, though never really, him too as the book dictated it's [sic] own edit, as any book that's worthy will" (31). Jenks continues this effacement of his own creative role by celebrating *Garden*'s new availability to the public, drawing no distinction between the manuscripts that were "not within reach of the world before"—and still aren't—and the published novel that now acts as their representative (31).[23]

Furthermore, Jenks suggests as proof that he was faithful to Hemingway's intentions the fact that he only cut and rearranged material, rather than adding anything, claiming, "all I really did was to cut away the excesses that once removed would let the story show" (33). However, the material Jenks cut while streamlining the story is significant to the meaning of the text. First, some of what he scrapped tells parts of the story from varying narrative perspectives, whereas the published novel's perspective stays close to David. In the manuscripts there are scenes without David present told in a more omniscient third person voice, and moments where the

[23] Previous critics, especially Moddelmog and Burwell, have argued that Jenks and Hemingway's publisher, Scribner & Sons, had much to gain from preserving Hemingway's macho public image, and these concerns are what Jenks truly channeled in his editorial process. Indeed, in Jenks's remarks to the MLA he provides a quick gloss on the story as "Hemingway's desire to take on his own myth without, however, destroying or relinquishing it" and explains, "I edited *The Garden of Eden* with love and with no little sense of presenting the book *while honoring and protecting the writer*" (33, emphasis added).

narration is closer to Catherine or Marita, even sometimes in first person in their voices.[24] Although the finalized novel presents a more unified voice and is arguably better for it, narrative perspectives other than David's provide better insight into other characters' motives. We learn from the glimpse inside Marita's thoughts, for example, that she is initially interested in Catherine, then in love with both Catherine and David, then decides she only wants David. In the published version we have no access to Marita's thoughts as she shifts her affections from one spouse to the other, so she comes across as senselessly cruel when she seduces and then rejects Catherine. Catherine complains, "[T]wo days ago when you made passes at me it was simply dandy but today if I felt that way the slightest bit you had to act as though I was an I don't know what. … As though you hadn't taught me what little I know" (134). Marita says nothing but "I'm sorry, Catherine," refusing her and the reader any explanation of her change in behavior (134).

The narrative perspective through which we read this novel determines and directs our readerly empathy by controlling our entry point into the aesthetic space between reader and text —and that empathy in turn determines how we interpret the text. When reading the published novel, any interpretation of Catherine's actions must occur through David, colored by his feelings and understanding of her actions. But the excised material opens up more points of entry for readerly empathy, allowing us to access the novel through Catherine and Marita as well as David, and making more feasible a reading of David and Catherine as partners in crime. We can choose to read against the grain of the published version and hunt for the "real" Catherine the

[24] See 422.1.3 for scenes without David present and 422.1.18 for one of several scenes narrated by Marita. (I cite the manuscripts by item number, folder, and where applicable, page, so 422.1.3 means item number 422.1, folder 3. Simple page numbers continue to refer to the published novel. To avoid copyright issues, I also only quote material from the manuscripts that has already appeared in published material elsewhere.)

way we might hunt for Dolores Haze in *Lolita*, but we can access Catherine more directly only by considering the manuscript material alongside or instead of the published novel.

The second category of material that Jenks cut from the manuscripts concerns additional characters and symbols. Much has been written about the role played in the manuscripts by Barbara and Nick, another couple similarly engaged in sexual games involving gender reversal and fluidity, who do not appear in the published novel. Whether they duplicate, reverse, or throw into crisis David and Catherine's sexual games, they too provide another point of access to the main characters that is not available in the published novel.[25] Similarly, in the manuscripts when Catherine explains to David what she wants them to do in bed, she invokes *The Metamorphosis of Ovid* by Auguste Rodin, a statue they have seen depicting a lesbian couple seemingly merging together. Removing this image eliminates some of the early moments when Catherine is explaining her desires to David and asking him to participate in such an experiment with her. She asks if he remembers the Rodin, then directs him to change "like in the sculpture" (422.1.1 qtd. in Comley and Scholes 54). In the published novel Catherine asks David, "Will you change and be my girl and let me take you?" (17). In the manuscripts, she continues, "Will you be like you were in the statue?" (422.1.1 qtd. in Peters 44). The statue is a kind of shorthand between them, like the place names, letting readers see that even if we don't fully understand what Catherine is describing, David does. Removing the statue and all the conversation surrounding it makes this moment vaguer, and more confusing for David and the reader alike. It also makes Catherine's actions more brazen and her descriptions of them less comprehensible, making her a less sympathetic character.

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[25] See Moddelmog, Burwell, Fleming, and Peters for various interpretations of the role of Barbara and Nick play in the manuscripts.

Most importantly of all, in the manuscripts it is not only Catherine who engages in gender-fluid games with David—Marita is a participant as well. The closest the published book comes to suggesting that Marita and David continue this kind of sexual activity he started with Catherine occurs when Marita reads David's autobiographical novel-in-progress. David asks her, "'What about the Madrid part?' He looked at her and she looked up at him and then moistened her lips and did not look away and she said very carefully, 'I knew all about that because I'm just the way you are'" (185). In the next scene Marita offers to do the things Catherine has done with David and he tells her to "stop talking" (185). The way this conversation has been edited suggests that it is possible she is offering to do what Catherine does only because she thinks it's what David wants, and that it is further possible that he does not take her up on her offer. Hemingway critics including Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes read David's relationship with Marita at the end of the published book as restoring both partners to a normative relationship of heterosexual monogamy.[26]

In the manuscripts, on the other hand, it is much clearer that Marita and David both enjoy and participate in gender-fluid sexual games. David tells Marita that she is different from other people because she knew about "the Madrid part" before they even met. He continues, "It's a secret and if you tell about it then it is gone. It's a *mystère*. But you know about it. … I didn't have to tell you about it. … You knew about it when I met you" (422.1.29 qtd. in Pond 85). Marita suggests that she and David could do the Madrid things and he would not have remorse, because unlike with Catherine, who had to change for those games, she knows how David really is because they are the same, and she knows that neither of them would have to change

[26] It is important to note that Comley and Scholes read the published novel against the manuscripts, in which they argue that is it the "abnormality" of David and Marita's relationship that appeals to him (although they decline to name or define this abnormality) (102).

(422.1.35). When she gets a boy's haircut like Catherine's, she shows it to David as evidence that she really can be both a boy and a girl simultaneously and does not have to change back and forth (422.1.36). Later Marita's thoughts reiterate her understanding of Catherine when she pities her for always having to try to make David like her, and reflects that in contrast, she and David are truly alike (422.1.36). Several similar scenes and conversations that follow this moment reinforce the fact that in the manuscripts, David plays out with Marita—and enjoys more fully—a sexual dynamic strikingly similar to the one he had with Catherine.

Debra A. Moddelmog argues that in the manuscripts David is afraid and remorseful about his sexual activities with Catherine because having sex with her in their various gender configurations suggest homosexual desire on his part (73-82). She interprets these moments in the extended ending to mean that Marita has found a rationalization that works for David and allows him to participate in the same sexual games without any worry that he might be homosexual. "You'll never have remorse because I'm your girl really and it never happened," Marita tells him, "It's not perversion. It's variety" (422.1.36 qtd. in Moddelmog 82). Whether we agree with Moddelmog about Marita and David's "specious logic" (82), the fact remains that in the manuscripts these games were always more about David's desires than Catherine's. It seems clear that if she is "mentally ill" by the end of the manuscript it's because she has been trying to twist herself into something she is not, for David's sake. When Catherine leaves, he continues exploring those same desires with Marita, whose fetishes match his own, and who Catherine has recruited specifically for this purpose.

While I am confident in my reading of the manuscripts of *Garden*—that the triad's sexual games are as much for David's benefit as for Catherine's, if not more so, and that Catherine's

actions have motives beyond jealousy and insanity—my certainty does not extend beyond the manuscripts. The published novel still stands as it is, vague and supporting multiple readings, even possibly tilting in the opposite direction from the manuscripts, suggesting that whether David and Catherine's activities are fully consensual or not, they are something David ultimately rejects. The combination of all of *Garden*'s textual material can offer no reconciliation or definitive interpretation; if taken together as one "text," the novel is at an impasse with itself. Like Catherine, we have to tear ourselves in two to read an ambivalent object.

Previous Hemingway scholars have pointed out the same instability in the text, especially when comparing the published novel to the manuscripts. No critics that I know of have explicitly connected the novel's ambiguities to problems of *consent*, however—no one frames the question of what David wants and whether Catherine violates it in terms of potential assault. As with other interpretive challenges of the book, it might be that Hemingway's image, and the allure of reading this novel biographically, stands in the way. Are we more comfortable saying David does not consent to these activities and is raped by his wife, or that he does consent and wants to be feminized? Since neither option is consistent with Hemingway's image, it seems preferable not to raise the question. Once we do, we might dislike any possible answers for reasons even beyond over-investment in Hemingway's machismo: readers are placed into politically uncomfortable positions no matter how they answer. If we believe that David does not want to do everything he does with Catherine, the fact that we are in the position of playing detective about these actions—parsing the silences and vaguenesses within the sex scenes to figure out exactly what these characters do—suddenly feels like taking voyeuristic pleasure in his violation. Furthermore, since David never calls himself a victim or these interactions nonconsensual, either

in speech or in the thoughts to which we have access, accepting this interpretation of events could be said to do (further) violence to his character by arguing that we know what happened better than he does.

If, on the other hand, we come to the conclusion that David wants to participate in these sexual games with Catherine, we still have to grapple with the scenes where he says no, or where he only says yes after Catherine convinces him. It is not as though the published novel cuts moments from the manuscripts when David unreservedly and enthusiastically says yes to Catherine. He says no, or is coerced into saying yes, in all existing versions of this story. If we conclude despite his dubious consent that David is happy with their sex life, and that he wants Catherine to act as she does, which much of the textual evidence suggests, Catherine's dangerous interpretive moves are somewhat justified, because she is accurately intuiting something about David and acting upon things he desires but does not articulate. In this reading, especially supported by the manuscripts, Catherine is a more sympathetic character. If after she leaves, David finds happiness with Marita, and that happiness includes the same gender play he started with Catherine, her laments that she tried to break herself apart for him make a new bittersweet kind of sense, as does the letter Catherine leaves behind, in which she admits it sounds "preposterous" but apologizes and says she loves him (237). Catherine appears to be sacrificing her relationship with David and doing whatever it takes to get him to "chang[e] his allegiance" to Marita (238). David and Marita see Catherine as an object for their hatred and pity throughout the ending of the book, but by the end of the manuscripts, readers (and David) might come to a relationship of fuller understanding for her.

The issue then becomes: do we *want* to understand Catherine? Do we want to put ourselves in her position and excuse her actions? Catherine characterizes her reasons for acting as she does in terms of compulsion, frequently saying she had to do what she did (37, 56, 114). But understanding whether her compulsions are driven by her own mental instability and gender confusion or by the interpretive leaps she makes for her husband's sake does not change the political problems with her actions. The published version of *Garden*, with Catherine cast aside as a villain, is a much easier book in this light. The manuscripts, presenting a more conflicted picture of Catherine, might be unwelcome additions to this story because they ask readers to become more entangled with a difficult character and her troubling violations of consent.

The fact that Catherine functions as readers' stand-in furthers that discomfort. She acts dangerously and destructively based on her interpretations of a difficult text (David), just as readers of *Garden* might. The unsettling ambiguity of the sexual relationships represented in this text through voids, silences, vagueness and economy of language structures the characters' relationships with each other and readers' relationships with the text. The book is as reticent as David is. Just as Catherine penetrates David physically and psychically, presuming to know even the desires he denies or leaves unspoken, so too do readers attempt to penetrate this text, perhaps misinterpreting, overreaching, or projecting their own wishes onto the withholding pages. Readers are tasked with arriving at difficult judgments where they might make the same politically suspect interpretative moves Catherine does. The discomfort of any interpretive position relative to this text suggests the novel's takeaway for all acts of readerly empathy: the challenge of becoming entangled with a dangerous text is that our interpretive decisions inevitably say just as much about us as they do about the text.

Fucking with Consent: *Fledgling*

Although David is perpetually unwilling or unable to articulate his desires, and Catherine assumes she reads him correctly and acts unilaterally, *The Garden of Eden* does not destabilize the nature of consent itself. In Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), characters articulate their desires, ask for and receive consent, and attempt to respect one another's wishes—all of which is potentially irrelevant. This novel tells a story of queer, interracial, cross-species, polyamorous familial networks. The people and vampires in these networks have varying and uncertain amounts and kinds of agency within their intimate, penetrative relationships. *Fledgling* challenges liberal humanist notions of consent and agency through its engagements with posthumanism and its uses and reworkings of the tropes of the vampire story. It mounts these challenges even as it also emphasizes agency's political importance and affective resonances, suggesting if not a perfect answer to the dilemma of consent in a posthumanist context, at least some ways of thinking through the problem.

Fledgling follows a young amnesiac vampire's quest to learn who has attacked her and destroyed her family, recover her identity, and seek justice. The protagonist, Shori, is bispecies and biracial, the product of a genetic engineering project designed to allow Ina (the novel's vampire race) to stay awake and go outside during daylight hours by splicing their genes with human DNA—specifically African DNA, since melanin is crucial to sun protection. As the novel unfolds, we learn that Shori is also bisexual and non-monogamous (without ever applying those labels to herself). Like all Ina, she uses her physical prowess and the hypnotic, addictive power of her venom to recruit humans as her *symbionts*: men and women she protects and supports, has romantic and sexual relationships with, and feeds from. Unlike some other Ina, however, Shori

makes attempts to be as honest as possible with her human symbionts and give them the choice of whether or not to be with her; it is ultimately unclear to characters and readers how much coercion and consent are involved in Shori's relationships with humans.

From the perspective of humanist philosophy, *agency* is the ability, derived from an Enlightenment notion of the subject, to make decisions and act on those decisions (Jacobs 92). In philosophy, agency frequently comes up in discussions of personal responsibility, where "moral agency" determines culpability or duty, but it is also important to discussions of personal autonomy, where the question arises of how motives, attitudes, capacity for reason, and external influences determine and mitigate someone's status as a "free agent" (Williams, Buss). The idea of consent is rooted in the same beliefs that the individual is capable of making, articulating, and acting upon rational decisions free from outside influence. This philosophical notion of agency has been thoroughly problematized by poststructuralist and feminist theorists including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Diana Fuss, who have deconstructed notions of the liberal humanist self. These theorists oppose the Enlightenment notion of a "constituting subject," instead positing a "constituted subject, a subject that is the product of social forces," an evolving, contingent being who is enmeshed within discursive webs and whose subjectivity emerges out of her relationships in and with the world (Hekman 45, Craig). Despite these deconstructions of the liberal humanist subject, many poststructuralist and feminist critics seek ways to retain some vestiges of agency, including the notion of consent. Letting go of myths of autonomy and cohesive humanist subjectivity in favor of relational and contingent ways of being means

searching for new posthumanist understandings of agency and consent—a project for which *Fledgling*'s imaginative reflections prove useful starting points.[27]

Fledgling suggests that it is possible for behavior, belonging, and subjectivity to emerge simultaneously through actions and emotions that evince some form of agency, but not unrestrained or autonomous humanist agency. The consent humans give to vampires is always dubious, but this particular vampire story includes some twists on the genre's conventions that highlight and interrogate questions of agency especially provocatively.[28] A science fiction story rather than gothic, horror, or fantasy, *Fledgling* provides a biological explanation for vampirism, raising issues of biodeterminism and nature vs. nurture.[29] *Fledgling*'s vampiric feeding suggests that it is possible that agency is complicated or limited by biological realities (embodiment, genetics, hormones), social or environmental influences that become internalized and biologized (and are therefore functionally inseparable from biology), and previous acts that reinforce and sediment habit into identity over time. *Fledgling* further highlights the *discursive* nature of these processes and relationships, and the role of readerly empathy and interpretation in making determinations of consent and agency, by highlighting several kinds of language use and storytelling. The centrality of naming and renaming, contracts and negotiations, legal testimony,

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[27] I label *Fledgling*'s characters *posthumanist* both because they are *post-human* in their evolving and hybrid biologies, and because they are *post-humanist*, rejecting humanism's understandings of identity and agency. Butler explores these conundrums of constrained agency within intimate relationships in posthumanist contexts in much of her fiction, including the Xenogenesis trilogy (*Lilith's Brood*), the Patternist series (*Seed to Harvest*), and her award-winning short story "Bloodchild." As Andrea Hairston argues, "Her stories focus on those who make the compromises, those who do not have the power to determine their place in society, those who are forced to live life defined by more powerful beings/forces" (297). Within these stories, "Butler names as heroes the world-weary ancestors who accommodated and compromised" (Hairston 301).

[28] Within *Fledgling* itself Shori researches vampires to learn more about herself and reports, "Many cultures seemed to have folklore about vampires of one kind or another. Some could hypnotize people by staring at them. Some read and controlled people's thoughts. It would be handy to be able to do things like that. Easier than biting them and waiting for the chemicals in my saliva to do their work" (37).

[29] See Florian Bast for more on this complication of agency within *Fledgling*.

and a doubly unreliable narrator (untrustworthy and amnesiac) all reinforce *Fledgling*'s deconstructions of agency and ask its readers to grapple with linguistic, affective, and biological difficulties surrounding determinations of consent.

Fledgling begins with Shori waking in a dark cave with severe injuries and no memory of where, who, or what she is. After she spends a few days healing, hunting, and exploring her surroundings, Shori, now walking down a dark road in the rain, is approached by a man in a car, who offers her a ride—and who then insists over her protests that she get into his car (8). This first encounter between Shori and the man, Wright, sets the terms of their relationship and previews the many complexities that this novel develops around issues of consent. Although the trappings of the scene prepare us to fear for the safety of the small, injured girl, who even narrates, "He scared me. I was less than half his size, and he meant to force me to go where I didn't want to go," we soon learn that it is she who has the upper hand, and it is Wright we should worry about: Shori is a vampire (10).

After a brief struggle—Shori tries to jump out of the car at Wright's suggestion that she needs a doctor, and Wright grabs and restrains her—she bites his hand. This first bite happens against Wright's wishes and perhaps in self-defense, but after he tries several times to pull away or shake her off, Wright relaxes, tells Shori the bite felt good, and lifts her onto his lap where she can bite his neck, this time with his consent. Shori then requests that Wright take her home with him, and he complies. As the story unfolds, *Fledgling* complicates its characters' experiences of agency in a number of ways, beginning with this moment of revelation that Shori is a vampire—but not the vampire readers might expect, and that humans in this book expect as well. As one of Shori's later symbionts tells her, "You're a vampire. … Although according to what I've read,

you're supposed to be a tall, handsome, fully grown white man" (91). The straight, white, fully grown man in this scene, the character actually in the more agentially constrained position, is exactly who we would expect to have the most agency in the "real world" and the more likely candidate for the role of vampire, based on generic conventions.

This subversion of expectations reveals the ways *Fledgling* extends the vulnerabilities and pleasures of relationally restricted agency across genders, races, and ages, universalizing certain specificities of embodiment. Science fiction in general and Butler in particular are known for playing with such power dynamics by constructing scenarios in which characters can all expect and fear challenges to their agency, freedom, and bodily integrity that in our social world pose special threats for feminized subjects, people of color, the economically disadvantaged, and the young. In *Fledgling*, even though Wright is male, white, and bigger than Shori, he is vulnerable to her both physically and emotionally, and unsure of how fully he can consent—and how much he wants to consent—to anything they do together. Shori's power over him is biological, but *Fledgling*'s biologization and universalization of constrained agency in intimate relationships serve to highlight the strength and intractability of such bonds even when they are not biological. Mass culture's current obsession with vampires[30] suggests we might be in a historical moment when white masculinity, without becoming defunct as a site of privilege, is experiencing the limits and historical mischaracterizations of its own agency, and turning to othered categories and biological necessities as figures for that process. Interestingly, it is precisely this "gradual and relentless removal of Western man from the fantastical capitalist role

[30] See for example the *Twilight* books and films (2005-2012), the *True Blood* books and television show (2001-2014), *The Vampire Diaries* television show (2009), the *House of Night* book series (2007-2014), and the *Underworld* film series (2003-present) for some popular, contemporary examples.

of venturesome, industrious agency" that Sharon Stockton argues underpins the persistent popularity of violence against women in twentieth century literature (3).

Judith Gardiner, in the introduction to *Provoking Agents* (1995), argues that in the postindustrial United States the links between men and production, and women and consumption have been weakened as "both men and women work more hours for wages, often in situations in which they have little control," and "both men and women spend leisure time shopping" and consuming television (11). As a result of these changing associations, masculine notions of agency must be rethought, and even privileged subjects might be pushed into crises of agency. Such a crisis reveals agency as a key link between sexuality and labor—a link embodied in the figure of the vampire.[31] Catherine MacKinnon once claimed, "Sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away" (515, qtd. in Gardiner 15). Gardiner cites this claim and adds, "I suggest that agency names the desirable qualities common to both sexuality and labor" (13). By crafting a vampire story in which a young, black, queer, female vampire occupies the position of dominance, but still without being a "free agent," and a seemingly older, white, straight, male human experiences the pleasures and pain of submission, but still without giving up his privilege, *Fledgling* emphasizes the difficulties of determining agency and consent for all posthumanist subjects, not only the minoritized ones excluded from liberal humanism's ideals.

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[31] Vampires have been extensively theorized. There is a consensus that they are perennially popular monsters because of their ability to embody the fears of any context in which they find themselves. (See for example Latham, Auerbach, Halberstam, Gelder, and Moretti). Even given their extreme mutability, though, two aspects of vampires' identity and function persist over time: their association with money (Latham, Gelder, Moretti), and their queerness (Gelder, Auerbach, Halberstam). A number of scholars who address vampires and queerness together do so in the context of the vampire as a fundamentally liminal, transgressive, or pangendered creature (Wisker, Benefiel, Krzywinska, Case), but also as a means of articulating the unspeakable (Palmer, Gelder, Hanson), and as a vehicle for social commentary surrounding normative sexuality, the nuclear family, and social institutions, which tie together the vampire's sexual and economic significations (Benefiel, Wisker, Branch).

During their first conversation in the car, Shori, who can't remember anything about herself, asks Wright to name her. He calls her Renee, because it means reborn. After Shori goes home with Wright, we read the first sex scene of the book, a scene full of the language of consent, control, negotiation, obligation, and freedom. We also begin to learn how the characters will remake their identities together, out of their mutual belonging. Neither Shori nor Wright knows how old Shori is, but she asserts, "I'm old enough to have sex with you if you want to." She follows this statement with, "I think you're supposed to. … No, that's not right. I mean, I think you're supposed to be free to, if you want to." Wright asks, "Because I let you bite me?" and Shori answers "I don't know. Maybe" (21). In this conversation sex is presented as something Wright desires and Shori allows, in the same way that feeding is presented as something Shori desires and Wright allows, framing the exchange of sex for feeding as a trade or a business transaction. Sex is also surrounded by language of both freedom and obligation: Wright is "free" to have sex with Shori because he is "supposed to be free to" and because Shori grants him that freedom, a seeming contradiction in terms.

The sex scene itself also highlights the novel's rhetoric of consent and control: Wright leads Shori to the bed, Shori directs Wright to undress her and himself, and Shori "let him push me back onto the bed, let him touch me… until, gasping, he caught my hands and held them" (22). Eventually Wright "forgot his fears, forgot everything" and Shori narrates, "I forgot myself, too" (22). On one level this forgetting means that Wright stops being cautious with his seemingly ten-year-old partner and Shori bites Wright again despite not intending to, but on another level these characters, one of whom already has amnesia, forget everything, including themselves, as they forge their new relational identities out of a moment of negotiated consent.

When Shori "forgets herself," Wright gives her a name, a home, and a set of labels (he is the first person to tell Shori she is a vampire, and that she is black [12, 31])—in short, an identity. Later, when they meet Shori's remaining family, she and Wright learn her previous name and details about her species. Shori also repays Wright's favor, giving him a new home and family, and even a new name of his own: he learns that when he became Shori's symbiont he unwittingly took an additional surname indicating his relationship to her (255).

The phrasing in this first sex scene foregrounds for the reader the transactional nature of Wright and Shori's relationship. Unlike liberal humanist subjects supposedly agreeing to this deal freely and willingly out of their respective positions of personal autonomy and rational free will, however, Shori and Wright bring their posthumanist subjectivities to this moment. They forget themselves and remake their identities together, in relation to one another: they are constituted subjects as well as constituting. And despite the sense that their subjectivities get fresh starts in this moment of forgetting, it is simplistic to conclude that these characters have consented from equal or completely free positions. Wright already seems to know that Shori wields some power over him—he says he probably shouldn't let Shori bite him again but then immediately adds, "Shit, you can do it right now if you want to" (18). *Fledgling*'s posthumanist understanding of agency becomes clear at moments such as this one: Wright is aware that he does not make decisions autonomously or freely, but he still uses the language of consent and negotiation to work through his conflicted desires.

Shori, despite her position of power over Wright, also seems to know her actions are not motivated solely by rational thought: she is bound not only by her attraction to Wright, but also by her vaguely remembered sense of what is supposed to happen, what she is supposed to give

Wright as a “reward for [his] suffering” (21). The restrictions within which Wright and Shori operate are even part of what they find sexy. They discuss Shori’s apparent age and control over Wright at length as they undress, examine each other, and get ready for bed. This scene dramatizes an erotics of power and agency that is repeated throughout the book. The dynamics of the Ina-human relationship and the mutual but unequal constraints their relationship places on them seem to be part of what arouses the characters, as well as a pervasive concern of *Fledgling* as a whole. Although their positions are different from what they would be were both characters human and nonfictional, the scene makes reference to the complexity of real-world power dynamics by referencing and altering them. *Fledgling* also points to a possibility for some continuation of agency in a posthumanist context precisely in its use of the language of consent and negotiation by characters who know full well that their ability to consent and negotiate is imperfect—and who, far from objecting to or lamenting their constrained agency, find it deeply attractive and satisfying.

Because the characters’ evolving understanding of their agency happens in a context of both sexuality and violence, theories of BDSM are appropriate for making sense of *Fledgling*’s understanding of consent. Butler’s description of this first sex scene, with its repeated use of characters “letting” and “directing” each other, language that evokes negotiation, and the specter of violence or struggle coded in gestures such as Wright pinning Shori’s hands and Shori biting Wright, highlights and previews the ways sex and violence are inextricably bound in this novel. Lewis Call, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, and Wendy Brown, makes a distinction between BDSM agency and liberal humanist agency in his reading of *Fledgling*. Brown argues that “the liberal form of consent actually ‘marks the subordinate status of the

consenting party,'" but Call claims that consent in a BDSM context is radically different: he argues that while the immensely powerful state demands submission from its relatively powerless subjects, "[m]utual desire guarantees the ethical content of erotic power exchange" for BDSM practitioners (Brown 163 qtd. in Call 133). I would contend that although they are much closer in status and power than the state and its subjects, Wright and Shori do not come to their negotiation from comparable positions, and even if they did, their "mutual desire" does not guarantee an ethical exchange of power. While radically different from the consent the state demands of its subject, the consent of BDSM practitioners (in many ways invoked by these characters' language) is not given completely free of context or constraint. Desire does not level the playing field, negate political and social contexts of contractual discourse, or erase the past—even for characters with amnesia.

Indeed, in *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (2011), Margot Weiss persuasively argues that BDSM practices interact with and are shaped by the "real world." A BDSM slave auction Weiss attends does not mindlessly repeat and reinscribe the historical trauma it invokes, but neither does it transcend, subvert, or exist apart from that historical trauma. Such scenes do not take place "in a 'safe, sane, and consensual' vacuum [but] rather, in relation to economic, social, and cultural regimes and embedded systems of privilege and power" (Weiss 20). Extended negotiations of the type that Shori and Wright participate in are necessary partly for exactly this reason: they borrow the language of the state to play with, reinforce, or reverse the power dynamics created by the state even in this setting supposedly removed from the state. BDSM negotiation practices can even help explain why Shori and Wright seem to enjoy their discussions of consent. Weiss writes that even though some BDSM

practitioners find detailed and protracted negotiation before scenes “ridiculous,” others, “especially women who have sex with men,” find such discussions pleasurable and such pleasures tied to feelings of safety (81-3). The negotiations establish relationships and practices of power and control, but their participants simultaneously recognize the unequal power and control they bring to scenes and communities before the negotiations even begin. These inequalities come from embodied realities of the outside world but also from the very identities practitioners fashion and reinforce when they practice BDSM, such as dominant or submissive. Far from a utopian opportunity to escape social realities of privilege and dominance, then, *Fledgling* supports a reading of BDSM relationships and scenes that emphasizes the ways they work in conversation with the webs of power their participants discursively inhabit.

After Wright has been with Shori for a few days and she has fed from him several times, they find themselves at a pivotal moment in their relationship that neither fully understands. After another encounter with her attackers, Shori is suffering from a gunshot wound and asks Wright to build her a shelter in the woods and leave her alone there to heal, something Wright is reluctant to do. During their discussion, Shori tells Wright, “I think you can still walk away from me, Wright, if you want to. … If you do it now, you can still go” (48). She tells him she thinks it would be wrong to keep him with her against his will, that it should be his choice to be with her. But she warns, “Wright, if you don’t take this chance, I don’t think you’ll be able to leave me. Ever. I won’t be able to let you, and you couldn’t stand separation from me”—he must leave her, permanently, “now or never” (49). Even as she presents Wright with these options, Shori is aware that they are unfair and complicated. She admits “I didn’t know what I was starting when I bit you the first couple of times. I didn’t remember. I still don’t remember much, but I know the

bites tie you to me" (48). Furthermore, she is aware that she can fully control Wright's behavior even now, before he is fully bound to her, because she offers to use that ability to help him leave her—she could order him to stay away, and he would obey her. Nevertheless, when Wright professes his desire to stay with Shori, she does not question his ability to make this decision, or admit to feeling any guilt or concern. She is simply "glad of his decision" (49).

Shori and Wright later learn that the bond between Ina and their human symbionts is almost unbreakable. Shori's father Iosef compares the relationship to both addiction and "mutualistic symbiosis," because it is so permanent and life-altering that humans frequently die when their Ina die (63, 73-4). Symbiotic Ina-human relationships in *Fledgling* can develop with or without human consent, but once they are established, any consent the human might have given can never be revoked. In this way the Ina-human relationship is once again like the BDSM practices Weiss writes about, specifically consensual nonconsent. Like this "real world" agreement, symbiosis in *Fledgling* can involve a moment of choice in which characters make a decision to surrender future possibilities of decision-making, in which a lack of agency is generated out of an act of agency. But as with its other engagements with consent, *Fledgling* complicates this scenario by raising the possibility that participants do not choose such arrangements as freely as it might seem.

The consensual nonconsent of *Fledgling* is produced, masked, and subverted by the fact that Ina venom is a powerful hypnotic and physically addictive to humans—what is true socially outside the novel is biologized in *Fledgling*. Once Wright and other humans become Shori's symbionts, it is possible that they will not consent to everything Shori does with them, or will consent but will not *want* to consent, but, goes Ina logic, they did agree to that very

nonconsensual relationship in their early negotiations. When Shori presents Wright with the choice to leave her forever or stay with her forever, he chooses to stay and continue reinforcing his deepening, relational identity—as well as continue restricting his own choices—and Shori accepts his choice at face value. He repeatedly says that he doesn't understand the situation, however: in the moment of decision he says "I didn't know what it would be like with you. I didn't know I would feel… almost as though I can't make it without you" (48). When he meets Shori's father, Wright says, "I don't really understand what I'm getting into," and later demands of him, "I want to know what's going to happen to me," again noting that he's "not entirely sure it's [his] idea" to be with Shori (63, 70). During the biggest confrontation between Wright and Shori, he protests that he didn't have enough information to make his choice or "a chance to figure… out" what he was agreeing to (83). Wright argues that there were mitigating circumstances at the moment Shori offered him freedom, and that he didn't know he would be one of many symbiotic partners, a fact that deeply bothers him. He contends that he made his decision of consensual nonconsent with incomplete knowledge.

In this conversation, Shori seems to have resolved her previous ambivalence over the position into which she has put Wright: "When I was shot, I gave you a chance," she insists. "It was… very hard for me to do that, but I did it. I would have let you go—helped you go. … You knew I would heal. I told you you weren't bound to me then. I offered you freedom. I told you I wouldn't be able to offer it again" (83, first ellipses in original). Wright is unhappy because although he gave consent, he did not give *informed* consent, a concept used most often in legal, medical, and bioethical contexts and rooted in a liberal humanist understanding of the world: to give informed consent, a subject must be autonomous and competent, must consent voluntarily

and without coercion, and must have received and understood full disclosures of the acts to be performed (Eyal). But Shori and the other Ina do not value complete knowledge or believe full autonomy is possible—they are posthumanist subjects for whom the humanist idea of informed consent is an impossibility. It is important to Shori to believe that Wright is with her willingly, that she didn't simply coerce him into his symbiotic role, as she could have. But she never admits (to Wright or the reader) any wrongdoing in keeping certain information from her symbionts or in feeding from them before asking them to make this irreversible decision—for her and the other Ina, there is no other way of doing things. Shori's newfound certainty in her dealings with Wright develops after both she and Wright have discussed the Ina-human bond with her father, who approves when Shori says she has "made [Wright] do things" for his own good, and apparently doesn't care about the contradiction when he claims that symbionts "will willingly commit their lives to you" (73). From an Ina perspective, then, this relationship is one of consensual nonconsent, even if not one of informed consent. From a human perspective, it might be something else entirely.

Following their argument over his level of consent to their relationship, Wright attempts to similarly violate Shori's consent by raping her. Shori narrates: "He was so angry—so filled with rage and confusion. He rolled onto me, pushing my legs apart, pushing them out of his way, then thrust hard into me. I bit him more deeply than I had intended and wrapped my arms and legs around him as I took his blood" (85). Afterward, Wright asks Shori if he hurt her. Shori says no and asks Wright if he was trying to hurt her, and Wright replies, "I think I was" (86). Although I interpret this moment as *attempted* rape, since Wright's intentions are to hurt Shori, he acts angrily and aggressively, and she only consents to sex tacitly and after the fact, I cannot

decide if it actually is rape—and the text is silent on this point. Shori does not think about or comment on Wright's actions or intentions except to say to him, "It's good to know we don't hurt each other even when we're upset," possibly suggesting that she does not see it as rape, but possibly suggesting only that Wright is incapable of physically hurting her (86). Furthermore, in a relationship structured by such profound, biologically inescapable inequity—Shori could order Wright to stop and he would—is it even possible for Wright to rape her? For that matter, is sex between them always automatically Shori raping Wright?

This event provides a stark contrast to the first sex scene of the novel, in which both characters are cautious, tentative, and aroused by their negotiations. By this point, they have reinforced and deepened their relational identities in ways that limit agency for both characters. Weiss argues that BDSM is something people repeatedly do and something people are; she claims that "the primacy of a fixed sexual identity as the ground of subjectivity is destabilized; instead, BDSM is an identity in practice, a deeply personal yet relational project of the self" (viii). "Symbiont" is similarly an identity in practice, and one that becomes stronger through that practice. It is also an *identity in relation* of the kind that Aimee Carrillo Rowe theorizes in *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*. Carrillo Rowe argues that "belonging precedes being," a revision of the existentialist and feminist formulation "becoming precedes being" that emphasizes relationality. As Carrillo Rowe elaborates, there is no subject outside of or prior to our "shifting and contingent relations of belonging" (27). I would add that as identity is constituted and reinforced through behavior and relationships, it also becomes harder to change.

In *Fledgling* these dynamics are literalized: human symbionts become more physically dependent on their Ina at every feeding, and they belong to their Ina and are altered by them at a biological level. The text also foregrounds connection between these relational dynamics and storytelling. Shori's and other Ina's symbionts frequently reference their current statuses (bound or not yet bound to Ina), the moments they made their decisions to become symbionts, and their feelings about their relationships with Ina. They may not be able to change their relationships, but they recognize that a great deal of reality is in how they tell the stories that shape that reality. Brook insists to Wright that Iosef, her original Ina, told her everything before she made her decision. She adds, "I wasn't hooked when he asked. He'd only bitten me a couple of times" (161). The facts of her story sound quite a bit like the facts of Wright's story, but Wright feels misled and coerced, whereas Brook tells her story in a way that empowers her by emphasizing her role in deciding to stay. Martin, a symbiont to a man named William, tells a more conflicted story, but even he focuses on the positive elements of his relationship, pointedly refusing to answer Shori when she asks if he is ever sorry he is a symbiont. He admits, "I never really had a chance. I didn't have any idea what I was getting into," but he clarifies that Hayden, William's father, told him what would happen and that he could still leave (204). These characters are irreversibly bound to their Ina in the present, and it would make no difference how they make sense of those relationships' pasts. But on the other hand, if their situations cannot be changed, why not give them a positive spin? Of course it's also possible that Ina influence their symbionts' memories of those pivotal moments, but again, it's not something they would need to do. If Ina did such a thing it would be only to make their symbionts more content with their lives —changing the story would change their realities.

When the mystery of Shori's attackers has been solved, she must testify against them in Ina court, a significant challenge due to her memory loss. This part of the story takes up a substantial portion of the novel (preparations for the trial begin two-thirds of the way through the novel, and the story ends shortly after the verdict), making Shori's ability to tell her own story a central concern of the text, given similar weight to the more suspenseful and plot-driven conflicts surrounding Shori's self-protection and quests for knowledge. How can Shori tell what happened to her when she doesn't fully remember it? As it turns out, the point of the trial is for a council of Ina to judge only the sincerity and truthfulness of the witnesses rather than any physical or circumstantial evidence. Ultimately it doesn't matter that Shori has very little proof of who destroyed her family (only the coerced confessions of three captured humans), because the Ina council can see that she is telling the truth and her antagonists are not. Shori's language is not what is read at the trial; her body is. Shori is an unstable and unreliable text for these Ina to read, however, because of her memory loss and her hybrid identity: some Ina believe that she thinks she is telling the truth but is too confused or impaired for her truthfulness to matter (294, 296), while others think that her body language, facial expressions, and scent cannot be trusted because she is not pure Ina (272, 295), and still others think the question of her reliability is irrelevant because it is obvious that the Ina responsible for the attacks are lying (294, 295). No one believes Shori is being dishonest, but many still find her unreliable or unreadable.

Although we know Shori's testimony to be true, and understand that she must be believed to find justice, the trial foregrounds for the reader the ways we have been lied to, manipulated, or only given part of the story throughout the rest of the book. Shori is a doubly unreliable narrator: she has every reason to downplay the control she exerts over her human partners, but at times she

is also legitimately not aware of what she is doing. The trial serves to highlight the stakes and shortcomings of Shori's language use more generally, and makes readers aware of their status as part of her audience—part of the jury assessing her reliability as a witness, just as we do while serving on Humbert's jury.

By this point in the novel Shori's unreliability has been thoroughly established. By the time she feeds from her second human partner, a woman named Theodora, she knows full well the influence she wields with her saliva. She notes, "Perhaps tomorrow I would come back and take a full meal from her. Now I was only making certain of her, seeing to it that she would be here, available to me when I needed her" (25). Shori then repeats this procedure with four more people. A short time later, she mulls over and rationalizes what she has done: Shori tells herself and the reader that she doesn't understand her actions or their consequences, but it is clear that she understands them well enough to perform them successfully. She is bothered that she is capable of treating people the way she does, but she also insists that they enjoy it, even that they want it, and that she is almost predetermined to manipulate them into letting her feed from them (26). In addition to the rationalizations surround her biting humans and presenting them with the "choice" of whether to be with her, there are many times throughout the book when Shori "asks" her symbionts to do things for her. Shori knows that she can give orders to her symbionts that they must obey, and readers know it as well, but there is no indication given when humans become unable to disobey her, and when Shori employs this ability. It is always unclear to the reader, and possibly to the symbionts, whether her requests are truly requests—or whether it's even possible that they could be once her symbionts are bound to her.

The novel suggests that Shori is misleading others and perhaps herself through her stated discomfort and confusion over what she is doing, and the seemingly full access readers have to her thoughts. Our access to her moments of self-reflection and doubt, combined with Shori's biological necessity to feed from people and the genuine care and consideration she shows them, might make it more likely that readers will excuse her violations of others' consent, especially once she is vindicated by telling the truth and being believed at the trial. In a sense the whole novel is Shori's trial. Which of the actions she takes with her symbionts will we the reading jury understand, excuse, or interpret as consensual? Our own consent to the text, writer, and narrator is manipulated almost automatically simply because of the nature of this first-person narration, characterized by the protagonist's quest for truth and self-awareness. In *Fledgling*, our dubious consent in the reading relationship is strikingly compared to that of a vampire victim's through the text's consistent emphasis on contracts and testimony: in those settings, language that is supposed to be clear, transparent, and unbiased because it is legally binding is actually murky, deceptive, and biased—and still legally binding.

Interactive Characterization: *Heavy Rain*

Both *The Garden of Eden* and *Fledgling* can be understood alternately through lenses of sexual assault or BDSM; their relationships can be described either as consensually playing with the very concept of consent, or as violating consent. Characters within these texts are called upon to make interpretive leaps and judgments calls, and if they are incorrect, their resulting actions can be understood as egregious violations. If they are correct, their relationships with other characters are less abusive, but readers' relationships with their texts are more dangerous. It is up

to us as readers to make determinations of characters' consent, and if we decide to read a fictional sexual encounter as consensual in the face of textual ambiguity that could support a different interpretation, we have to admit that we might be excusing rape.

The relationship between characters who make difficult determinations of consent and readers of the texts in which they appear is the final concern of this chapter. Literature includes a spectrum of such relationships, from those established through characterization and narrative perspective to those in postmodern metafiction in which readers are more directly invoked and drawn into the text. The end of that trajectory moves outside of literature entirely, however, and it is for that reason that the next text I consider is a narrative video game: Quantic Dream's 2010 "interactive drama," *Heavy Rain*. In gaming, rather than readers projecting themselves into characters, players interact with the "texts" of games as characters themselves. If readers of *Lolita* could be considered complicit in Humbert's deeds simply by virtue of turning pages and propelling the story onward, are players of games even more complicit? Readers are not passive consumers of content—there are many ways that readers can talk back to, interact with, and appropriate written texts. But it is undeniable that interactive media, such as games, give their "readers" more opportunities for direct participation and intervention: we do not *read* games, we *play* them. Is reading the description of a murder different, then, from pressing a button and causing a digital avatar to fire a gun, killing another digital avatar representing another real player? Does the collapse of player/reader into character in any way make us more culpable for the events within games than those within books? What does the relationship between player and game character suggest about the aesthetic experience of readerly empathy?

Heavy Rain tells the story of the Origami Killer, who abducts small boys and puts their fathers through gruesome and harrowing trials to save them, killing the boys when their fathers fail. Players' primary task in the game is to find and rescue the most recent victim before he drowns; the Origami Killer keeps his victims chained in storm drains and as the rain continues day after day they are in ever more danger. The secondary, related goal of the game is to collect clues and deduce the identity of the killer. The tone of the game is one part gory horror film—the trials include crawling through a tunnel full of broken glass, cutting off your own finger, and murdering a drug dealer—and one part heavy-handed tear-jerker. (In an emblematic scene, for no reason related to the plot, the father of the current victim watches his other son die after throwing himself in front of a moving car attempting to save his life.) The game has four playable characters whose narratives rotate and flesh out different aspects of the case: Ethan Mars is the father of the current victim, Scott Shelby is a private investigator (and is eventually revealed to be the killer), Norman Jayden is an FBI profiler, and Madison Paige is a photojournalist.

The main characters of *Heavy Rain* present their players with some of the same difficulties of readerly empathy that Catherine and Shori do: unreliability, lack of access to thoughts, characterization as mentally unstable, and position within the text. They also present some new challenges specific to the video game medium, namely the fact that video game characters are typically less fully realized than characters in novels. Unlike in most novels, in a narrative game, designers strive for just the right amount of characterization to make characters interesting while leaving enough space for players to project themselves into those characters, who act as their representatives within the game. Characters have to believably be capable of a range of responses and actions depending what players choose for them, while still also being

characters and not mere avatars. The resulting half-formed beings create a genre-specific challenge to *affective* empathy, since presumably it's difficult to develop a sense of fellow-feeling with a fictional creature who is only partly invoked, but they also create potentially stronger opportunities for *readerly* empathy, because the player is perhaps better able to project herself into the text when she can experience the events of the game as though they are happening to her.

The collapse of player and character at issue here occurs in many video games, but it is the four playable characters, their roles within the story, and their relationships to the player that make *Heavy Rain* ideal for interrogating this issue. At times, the player's empathetic bond with the game generated by this collapse is successful: unobtrusive, appropriately intense, and taken seriously by the game. Just about all of these moments involve affectively empathizing with Ethan by working with him on the game's primary goal of saving his son's life, and sharing his terror and confusion over what is happening. For Ethan, apprehending the killer is of secondary importance, and his scenes are structured around goals of immediate survival, making them the most affectively intense of the game.

Madison, Jayden, and Shelby are seemingly driven by the second of the game's quests, discovering the identity of the killer. Their actions might save Ethan's son's life, but the situations they encounter focus on investigation. When I presented a conference paper criticizing *Heavy Rain*'s gender dynamics and suggesting the game is alienating to female gamers because of Madison's shallow characterization and limited options, a woman in the audience passionately disagreed, arguing that as she played all four characters she had Ethan and his son's plight in her mind—she said she played the game not as a woman, but as a mother. This player's experience

suggests that the character of Ethan is dominant not only in terms of plot but in terms of emotional attachment. Even as players entangle themselves with the game through the other three characters, they bring Ethan with them, furthering the other storylines in order to assist him, and caring about other characters primarily for their roles in his life. The affective empathy *Heavy Rain* facilitates with Ethan is a powerful bond, guiding interpretive choices players make throughout the game—with potentially dangerous consequences for the other characters. After all, players acting as Madison, Shelby, and Jayden sometimes have options to hurt or sacrifice those characters, and might be more likely to choose those options if they are heavily invested in Ethan's story at the expense of the others'.

At other times the collapse of player and character fails to produce a bond of affective empathy with characters—or produces one only to undermine it—and these disruptive moments highlight the game's unusual experience of readerly empathy by taking the player out of the game. For example, at one point Shelby finds himself trapped in a car, underwater, with Lauren, a non-playable character (NPC). Lauren is unconscious, and playing as Shelby you have the choice to save her, or only free yourself and let her drown. If you are trying to play in a way that feels true to the plot or characters you are helping to create, chances are you want to save Lauren, either because you care about her as a character, or because you care about Shelby, who seems to care about her. You don't at this point know that Shelby is the killer, so you have no reason, ethical, pragmatic, or character-based, to purposely allow Lauren to drown. Because it is an emotionally charged scene, however, the options on the screen are purposely difficult to decipher quickly, and it is easy to press the wrong button, the one corresponding to your own seatbelt instead of hers—or to assume, as I did, that you have to unbuckle yourself first and then free her

—and if you do so you watch helplessly as Shelby turns his back on Lauren and swims to safety. It is not that Shelby attempts to save Lauren and fails (although that is another possibility if you're too slow)—it's that a player's misinterpretation of her options can result in a character's purposeful decision.

Such an encounter with the game reveals a breakdown in the assumed relationship between character and player, in which a player projects herself into the game through that character, and the character's actions reflect the player's decisions. In such a moment players may actually feel that Shelby acts out of character, because he does not act as they would, or even as they *did*. Reviewer Emily Short says, "I replayed the sinking-car scene until he succeeded in rescuing Lauren… because it seemed inconceivable to me that this character, the character I'd developed in tandem with the game's authors, would ever leave a woman to drown." She later feels betrayed by the revelation that Shelby is the killer "because that twist negated the meaning of every truly interesting choice I'd made in the game up to that point. All that time I thought I was at least getting to craft one character, I was being played." Counterintuitively, it seems that entering a text and making characters' decisions for him can actually disrupt the empathetic connection a player feels with a text. To even present the possibility of Shelby making decisions players find uncharacteristic can feel like a betrayal; the moment when the game retakes control and shows Shelby swimming away is further jarring after being presented with the illusion of choice. Although we might uncomfortably empathize or identify with Humbert, Catherine, or Shori, we are neither called upon to animate those characters and make their decisions for them, nor to then experience surrendering that control.

Furthermore, each of those literary characters is able to keep things from readers through the conventions of literary narrative perspectives, but it is strange and unlikely that when we play Shelby and have access to his thoughts he never thinks anything that reveals to us that he is the killer. Readers of *Lolita, Garden,* and *Fledgling* can safely assume that those narratives are not comprehensive, or that they imply some amount of distance between storyteller and reader simply by virtue of being shaped into narratives. Shelby's thoughts, however, are presented to players as floating words or phrases triggered by his surroundings. Players can select them to hear more, and while some seem to be helpful to solving the game's puzzle or at least figuring out what to do next, they are also random and disconnected, not pieced into a narrative. Without the pretense of a story being told by Shelby or a narrator close to him, there is no presumed distance between Shelby and the player controlling him. In effect, to keep his secret from the player, he shields his thoughts from himself. The entanglement a player is supposed to feel with this game begins to unravel when Shelby does not meet our expectations closely enough.

This breakdown in readerly empathy is intensified by one of the game's marketers' stated goals: making players feel things strongly. Player emotion is assumed to be a marker of success by developers and reviewers alike. Favorable reviews include statements like, "The most gripping element of *Heavy Rain* is the fact that it is propelled by recognizable human emotions" and "I haven't been this emotionally invested in the video games I'm playing since, well, maybe forever" (Totilo, Benedetti). Of course a reader or player's emotional investment in a text is a common goal, but this game was extremely well received partially on the basis of succeeding in making players feel a range of negative emotions, including fear, anxiety, and dread. We should ask then, not why the game's creators want players to feel, but why they want players to feel

these specific ways. Much has been written in recent years about the capacity video games possess for cultivating player emotion and empathy and thereby, in some vague way, making players into better people.[32] But *Heavy Rain*'s relentlessly negative affective landscape could be experienced as subverting its attempts at readerly empathy. If we invest affective empathy in the game's characters only to later feel we've been tricked by the game merely to intensify our negative emotional reactions, such a gameplay experience would expose a disconnect in the assumed relationship between readerly and affective empathies. This game seems to assume that making players feel anything is a worthwhile goal—a strange belief, it seems, when the emotions the game generates undermine the very sense of entanglement with the game that should be facilitating and working in tandem with those emotional responses.

Disruptions in readerly empathy are especially clear at the game's moments of potential rape. There are several scenes in the game that are not presented by the narrative or characters as sexual assault, but that can be read that way due to the game's complex and foregrounded engagement with player agency. *Heavy Rain* fits into two seemingly incompatible genres and mechanisms of play: the first is the branching storyline model, which supposedly gives players a great deal of freedom and several viable outcomes for any decision they make. In other games of this type, players can have characters specialize in one class or another, choose to complete side quests or not, travel to locations in whatever order they choose (affecting the options available when they get there), or even make complex ethical decisions that affect the plot and characters from that point forward, and that have fully fleshed out stories and repercussions associated with any option. Sometimes it becomes clear by the end of such a game that the choices a player has

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[32] See for example Carolyn Petit and Ryan Smith.

made were less than ideal and if she replayed the game she could try for a better outcome by making better choices; sometimes all choices are equally valid and rewarding, just different. *Heavy Rain* is not such a game. Instead, it is structured around a fundamental tension over how much choice it actually wants to extend to its players, as its second generic designation is "interactive drama." In some regards an interactive drama is a film in which the player only has control over the most mundane decisions, like whether to let your child watch TV or make him do his homework (actual choices early in *Heavy Rain*). Critics have pointed out that even the "action sequences are controlled through so-called Quick-Timer Event sequences, requiring the player to tap certain buttons at certain times during, say a fistfight," rather than fighting improvisationally, a feature that has "been criticized as game designer crutches, a cheat that lets designers render flashy action without offering controls that give players meaningful involvement in what's going on" (Totilo). Where these scenes can be said to have a variety of outcomes, too often that variety consists of where you are finally defeated, or how injured you get before winning.

These two seemingly incompatible game styles clash when, despite its scriptedness, *Heavy Rain* foregrounds and emphasizes its decision-making elements. Stephen Totilo writes,

> *Heavy Rain* is uncomfortable, its designers skilled at putting the player in awkward situations and making them sort their way out of it. What choice would you make if you were in the back of a convenience store while a robber walks in and pulls a gun on the owner? … The game is composed almost entirely of vignettes like this, behavioral laboratories that appear to have no Game Over wrong answer.

Indeed, another reviewer confirms, “You can’t ever actually fail in *Heavy Rain*. There is no Game Over screen, and nothing will force you to have to replay anything. No matter what you do, the game, its characters and the story move on” (Roper). Despite the assertion that there are no wrong answers, however, “if a main character dies, the game will continue on anyway, but you’ll miss story clues and scenes that the now-dead character would have come across” (Roper), and you will experience one of the endings that is clearly a failure, a less than ideal outcome due to your mistakes and incorrect choices. Because of its two incompatible genres, branching storylines contained within an interactive drama, *Heavy Rain* therefore presents the player not with choices between two different stories, but with “choices” between success and failure within its one inescapable narrative. This kind of false choice holds true even when the options in question are not fully explained in advance and the player has to guess whether to run right or left, whether to press triangle or circle. What the clash between these two game genres boils down to is that players are made constantly aware of the game’s *illusion* of agency, a feature especially troubling in scenes of sex and violence.

Heavy Rain’s female characters bear the brunt of its agential problems, overwhelmingly in scenes of sexualized violence and sexual coercion. The scenes I read as potential sexual assault or coercion do not present themselves that way; they are overtly violent or sexual but not both. They occur, however, within the context of a deeply misogynistic game that traffics in limited and stereotypical roles for women, as well as gratuitous violence against them. Ethan is married during the game’s prologue but divorced for the game proper, and his wife disappears from the story. We encounter several other minor female characters in one scene each: a suicidal mother, an Alzheimer’s patient, and a reporter. Lauren Winter is a more substantial but non-

playable character: she is the mother of a past victim of the Origami Killer, currently supporting herself as a prostitute. She becomes Shelby's sidekick, and if they both survive to the end of the game she kills him in an epilogue scene. In her first scene she is attacked by a customer and the player, as Shelby, can decide whether to intervene. She is sexualized and traumatized, a victim to be rescued, a man's helper, or a vengeful, grieving mother, nothing more. Finally, we have Madison Paige. Despite her supposed role as a journalist and the fact that she is a playable character, Madison is also reduced to the roles of victim, nursemaid, sidekick, and sex object: in her first scene she walks around her apartment in her underwear, showers, and is attacked by home invaders. In her next scene, she finds an injured Ethan and tends to his wounds despite the fact that at this point she knows nothing about him except that he *might be the killer*. In later scenes she helps Ethan escape from police custody, strips for a mob boss in an attempt to collect evidence, and has sex with Ethan. She is also the star of the DLC (downloadable content) chapter of the game called "The Taxidermist," in which she goes to a different serial killer's house, discovers his collection of stuffed women's corpses, and must either escape, hide and wait for help, or die a grisly death. Madison is the last playable character to be introduced, has the earliest possible death, and appears in the fewest chapters of any playable character. One of her death sequences includes a doctor mutilating her genitals with a drill. A YouTube video compilation of every Madison Paige death scene clocks in at twenty-two minutes long (Nichols).

Heavy Rain's misogyny problem converges with its consent problem in the limited choices given to and related to women. When Lauren is attacked by a john, Shelby can ignore Lauren's attacker or defend her, but Lauren has no option to fight him off herself, tell Shelby what she wants him to do, or call anyone else for help, and after the fight is over Shelby has no

option to help her clean up the mess he made of her apartment or pay her for the things he broke during the fight. If you do not intervene, the only consequence is that the next time Shelby sees Lauren she has a black eye; it makes no difference to the game if this woman is beaten or not. Throughout your encounters with Lauren you, as Shelby, cannot offer her any substantial help in the form of shelter, money, resources, or even a sympathetic ear. The conversational options that seem like kindness are actually tactics you can use to get information out of her. Despite the game's emphasis on player choice, you have very limited options for interacting with this character, and despite the game's goal of producing player emotion, you are not allowed to express any feelings toward her.

Furthermore, because players do have *some* choice at these moments, the game exacts a kind of consent under duress from its players. Because players have the option to intervene in Lauren's attack, if you choose not to protect her the game can acquit itself of charges of violence against women because you made that decision—never mind that you were not the one to write that scene to begin with. If reading a novel is participating in a relationship of consensual nonconsent, narrative gaming asks even more from its players by requiring them to actively select and participate in characters' actions with which they might not agree. What's more, players must perform these coerced tasks *well* in order to advance the game, and the amount of player agency that is present obscures the scripted, nonconsensual nature of the politically troubling acts players must perform while shifting responsibility onto the player.

There are a number of these scenes in *Heavy Rain*, in which characters and players together are forced into circumstances of extremely constrained agency even while they are told, explicitly or implicitly, that they are in control of what happens. Several of these moments are

sexual in nature and can therefore be interpreted as rape, sexual assault, or coercion. In one such scene, Madison may or may not have sex with Ethan, but the decision is not hers to make. Although both Ethan and Madison are playable characters, in that scene we play as Ethan alone. During a moment of intimacy between the two characters, we, playing as Ethan, can choose between the options “kiss” or “not kiss.” If we choose “kiss,” Madison automatically kisses back and the characters proceed to have sex.

The animation of the scene makes it clear that Madison consents and enjoys everything that happens. The reason this scene can nonetheless be read as nonconsensual is the player’s relationship to the characters. At other times in the game we get to make decisions about how Madison acts, as Madison. In this scene, however, we only get to make decisions as Ethan—Madison’s agency is removed from the equation entirely. Just as reviewer Emily Short felt violated by Shelby letting Lauren die because it was a betrayal of the character she had been animating and co-writing with the game, Madison being acted upon in this way could be experienced by some players as a similar violation of her character as well as her agency. To a certain extent, even Ethan’s consent is violated, since he only chooses to kiss Madison, and the game automatically makes him have sex with her. To consider an alternative way the game designers could have written this moment, imagine instead a scene in which the player switches between playing the two characters. Any number of variations could be written in: who initiates the kissing, whether the other partner reciprocates or not, whether the kissing leads to sex or not—or even, since two playable characters interact in the scene, whose perspective you play from. It seems that more possible options would lead to more branching storylines and further the game’s exploration of the consequences of difficult decisions. Instead, in this scene the game

forces players and characters into extremely limited options surrounding female sexuality. Madison is a playable character except when she is a prop for a playable male character.

In another troubling scene, Madison's first in the game, she has trouble sleeping, so she walks around her apartment in her underwear and has the option to take a shower—really the player's option to see animated breasts. Then home invaders break in and attack: the player must fight them off as they chase Madison around the apartment, in a scene haunted by the specter of sexual assault by virtue of her lack of clothing. Finally the whole scene is revealed to be a dream sequence when Madison is brutally killed and wakes up in a panic. Because the sequence is a dream, no matter how well we play we can only prevail against the attackers for so long—eventually no matter what the player does, Madison's throat will be cut. Because it's a dream, the scene serves no purpose for the game beyond setting an ominous tone and providing players with another action sequence. Despite the game's supposed incorporation of player agency, we do not have the option to wear more than underwear and a tank top. We do not have the option to call 911 at the first sign of trouble. We do not have the option to live through the scene. And nothing we can do before the scene begins will prevent it from happening.

Finally, *Heavy Rain* includes an infamous striptease, seemingly the one scene that has received enough criticism that David Cage has felt the need to defend it (Bramwell). In the course of her journalistic investigation, Madison finds herself in a club belonging to a mob boss. She needs to talk to the boss as the next step in her investigation, but he is secluded and refusing guests. She needs to get his attention and convince him to invite her into his private suite. Naturally the only way to accomplish this task is to dance provocatively. Playing as Madison, we must alter her clothing (unbuttoning buttons, shortening her skirt), and put on makeup in the club

bathroom. Then we must learn the proper moves by copying the other women in the club, and dance to get the boss's attention. When we have completed these tasks well enough, Madison is taken to the boss's private room, where she has to perform a striptease. The player does have the option to grab a lamp and hit the boss with it, but knocking him out defeats the purpose of meeting him to gain information. The controls are also very unclear in this scene, making it easy to miss the cue to hit him. Finally, we must take off at least one piece of Madison's clothing before the option to grab the lamp appears.

As with the home invasion and the sex scene, this event centered on Madison is one of the moments in which players have the fewest options. Ethan is made to perform many grisly and disturbing tasks by the Origami Killer, but if we choose not to do them or fail at them, the game continues and the story is basically unaltered. If we refuse to strip, the game does not proceed. The player must make Madison take off her clothes or the game is over. *Heavy Rain*'s treatment of women is structured around dubious consent on the part of its characters—even if Madison can be said to choose to strip, her choice is one of desperation—and on the part of its players, whose only alternative in moments such as this one is to turn off the game.

This reading of *Heavy Rain* is not necessarily obvious to its players, especially those who comprise the game's target audience. *Heavy Rain*'s gender politics are deeply, insidiously problematic not merely because the female characters are sexualized and victimized, which is by no means unique to this game, but more importantly because of the ways the game uses affective and readerly empathy to achieve those effects. One of the primary goals of *Heavy Rain* is to make players attach affective empathize to the male characters, especially Ethan, as they play. It it clear that players are not intended to extend similar affective empathy to Madison, though: in a

telling moment in one favorable review, the reviewer argues that *Heavy Rain* "presents many moments of surprising maturity… [including] multiple inversions of gaming's often lascivious presentation of attractive women. You may get the girl you're controlling to take her top off, but you may feel guilty about it later" [Totilo].) The language of this review suggests that when players control Ethan they act *as* him, but when they control Madison they act *upon* her.

If *Heavy Rain* succeeds in making players empathize with its male characters, especially Ethan, it does so at the expense of its female characters, especially Madison, despite their seemingly equal status. Because they are both playable characters, Ethan and Madison should function similarly as entry points for players' *readerly* empathy with the game. This disjuncture, whereby we are supposed to become entangled with the game through Madison but not become emotionally attached to her, situates her similarly to Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. The differences, of course, are that while Bateman is the only focalizer of his text Madison is one of four, and while Bateman is a serial killer, Madison is a victim.

Postcritical Attachments

The Garden of Eden, *Fledgling*, and *Heavy Rain* all explore the challenges of determining and naming consent in stories that can persuasively be read as representing either sexual assault or consensual nonconsent. They suggest the ways bodies and texts can be unstable and unreliable as objects for reading consent, they highlight the flaws in the assumptions underlying the concept of consent itself, and they foreground the potentially dangerous role readers play not only in determining consent but in creating it. In doing so, they dramatize some of the difficulties of readerly empathy as an aesthetic relationship dependent upon flawed and inadequate language.

Garden presents one particular set of gaps and failures in language through David's inability to name and speak his true desires. What he wants apparently cannot be articulated, whether because of shame, the nature of the desires (desiring that someone knows what he wants without him having to say it), or the language itself (needing a word that means both yes and no, or needing to say no and have it mean yes). In the black-and-white distinction between yes and no, there is no room for David to express the fact that he both wants and does not want what Catherine offers him, or wants not to have to make the decision, or doesn't want to want it, or wants it but can't say he wants it, or all of the above. There are times when he says yes and doesn't mean it, and times when he says "maybe" or "sure" or "if you want" and it means almost nothing (15, 235, 168). There are also times when it seems that the dynamic of saying no and meaning yes is part of what David finds alluring. Catherine explains to Marita, "if he ever says no about anything, Marita, just keep right on. It doesn't mean a thing" (188). The manuscripts carry this no-that-means-yes dynamic into David's relationship with Marita. She tells him she won't ask permission before being his boy, and he tells her no. She replies, "I love to hear you say no. It's such a non-definite word the way you say it. It's better than anybody's yes" (422.1.36 qtd. in Pond 60). After David suggests that he won't say anything, Marita insists that he will say no because she knows what it means when he does; David replies that he loves her (422.1.36). Marita makes a point of rejecting the parts of David and Catherine's relationship that don't work, yet when Catherine tells her that David doesn't mean it when he says no, she takes this advice to heart, and David seems to enjoy Marita playing with consent in this way.

"Dubcon," the category of erotic literature into which I have implicitly placed these three texts, plays with the blanks in language to establish the dubious nature of its consent. Critics of

this kind of literature might point out that dubious consent is not consent and object to the problematic gray area of acceptable rape they create. Defenders could point out that these stories can be written in such a way that *readers* know the true desires of the participants. In such literature the ultimate fantasy is that your partner knows what you want without you having to speak it—and even allows you the linguistic freedom to speak a "no" that really means "yes." The desire in such scenes is for a partner who knows you perfectly, reads you accurately despite any linguistic and semiotic difficulties, and is so empathically bonded with you that she or he cannot be wrong about you. It is ironically only through language that such desires can find fulfillment: partners in the "real world" must express these desires and codes in advance, sometimes even signing contracts and designating safe words. Fiction, while still using language to cultivate an illusion of silence, can create scenarios in which such interactions can be language-free for the characters: they do not have to tell each other what they want, what their limits are, or when their no means yes, and their partners can know all these things anyway. The key to such fiction is that readers have access to characters' thoughts and are able to confirm that characters are reading each other correctly. Our readerly empathy become the indispensable part of the characters' relationship that sanctions such dangerous interpretations.

Heavy Rain similarly presents players with a failure of communication, and enlists their participation in a situation that occurs between a clean yes and an unequivocal no. The difficulties of language use in this game—the disjunction between the option you pick and what happens in the game, the difficulty of making such decisions while reading blurry, moving text on screen and intuiting emotional states through a vibrating controller—especially highlight the linguistic problems of giving and ascertaining consent. Just as David in *Garden* has no words to

articulate his desires, I don't think there is a straightforward way to characterize the experience of playing *Heavy Rain*'s sex scene. In it, two characters consent to sex. They both have at least the same level and kind of agency literary characters usually have. But the scene occurs after one character's agency has been downgraded from the heightened, interactive level of freedom other playable characters in a video game enjoy. We could have made a decision for Madison playing as Madison; instead we must make that decision for Madison only while playing as Ethan.

Playing this game occurs within a dynamic of consensual nonconsent, like reading a novel, but *Heavy Rain* gives players some agency within that relationship, and sometimes a little choice is a dangerous thing. When gameplay is designed so that we are coerced into choosing torture, murder, and rape through limited options, we have the choice to turn off the game, just as we have the choice to walk away from reading about these things in a novel. But if we stay in, we can be punished and blamed by the game itself (through any number of negative plot or character outcomes that result from our "choices") for the decisions its designers and programmers have made. This experience during gameplay can be useful in bringing these questions of player culpability to the surface, but it can also eclipse the role of the game designers and developers in creating those narrative options to begin with. When players make a decision between two misogynistic options, it hides the writers' decision to give players only those two options. Players of *Heavy Rain* find themselves in situations in which they, like Wright in *Fledgling*, can legitimately protest that although they technically had a choice, it was so constrained and ill-informed as to be functionally meaningless.

These texts place readers uncomfortably close to situations of dubious consent, ask us to make judgment calls that are both interpretive and political, and push us to recognize our

complicity in those situations and the consequences of our aesthetic and affective reading encounters. These experiences should confirm that readerly empathy is not apolitical, a charge leveled at Iser's theory of entanglement upon which my concept of readerly empathy is partially based. To flesh out my sense of how readerly empathy can be both an aesthetic encounter and a politically, historically attuned mode of interpretation, I turn to Rita Felski. In *Uses of Literature* (2009), Felski presents an "un-manifesto" of reading, asking, "Aren't many of us trying to weave our way between the Scylla of political functionalism and the Charybdis of art for art's sake, striving to do justice to the social meanings of artworks without slighting their aesthetic power?" (9). Bringing phenomenology into conversation with aesthetics and politics, Felski argues, "encourages us to zoom in and look closely at what this condition of being-a-self involves. Such scrutiny, it seems to me, does not require any belief in the autonomy or wholeness of persons, nor a disavowal of the obscurity or opacity of aspects of consciousness" (17).[33] What Felski advocates is an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion that she terms "postcritical reading"; part of what such a method values is "reading as an embodied mode of attentiveness," an understanding of the act of reading as "transcending the false choice between autonomous aesthetics and political embeddedness" ("Critical").

One of the things we get from applying these theories to literature that potentially portrays rape is a reconciliation of aesthetics and politics in reading practices. Rape is as politically important as an issue can be, and the solution of preserving undecidability and seeing all perspectives at once, while at first glance perhaps seeming to abdicate its political responsibilities, could actually be understood as politically responsible. Gunne and Thompson

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[33] Nevertheless, Felski has little use for Iser, contending that his "imagined readers are curiously bloodless and disembodied, stripped of all passions as well as of ethical and political commitments" (16).

cite Frances Ferguson's argument that while conventional rape scripts in legal settings and popular discourse undermine and disadvantage victims, there is potential for subversion of these scripts in contemporary literature depicting rape precisely in its vagueness: "the ambiguity of its psychological complexities means that relationships can never be stipulated as in a contract, a bargain or a legal document"—an argument all the more provocative when applied to texts that play with the language of, but do not explicitly include, contracts and legal documents (11). A postcritical approach to reading—an approach that rejects the totalizing impulses of symptomatic reading and the hermeneutics of suspicion while still recognizing the necessity of bringing history and politics to bear on literature—allows for multiplicity, ambiguity, and enchantment within literary interpretation. Furthermore, its both/and reconciliation of aesthetics and politics is strongly reminiscent of the discourses of empathy that claim the experience bridges aesthetic encounters and political emotions. I wish to continue keeping these two aspects of empathy separate for now, however, and my next chapter shifts from the aesthetic experience of readerly empathy to the more overtly political experience of affective empathy.

"Voices From Inside this Nowhere Place": Affective Empathy and the Politics of Projection in Post-45 Pregnancy Literature

Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) ends with Maggie (the titular cat) making a dramatic announcement. Throughout the play, dying patriarch Big Daddy has made it clear that he wants to will his plantation to his favorite son and daughter-in-law, Brick and Maggie, and the only thing preventing him from doing so is their childlessness (which also stands in for and proves Brick's alcoholism, depression, and possible homosexuality). As the older son, Gooper is the rightful heir to the family fortune, and he has proven his worth financially by managing the family's estate, and domestically by marrying a beauty queen and fathering five children. But Big Daddy doesn't like Gooper, and is looking for an excuse to cut him out of the will. Maggie provides such an excuse in the final scene of the play by announcing she is pregnant. Although everyone present is almost certain she is lying, the unverifiability of her claim secures the plantation for Maggie and Brick.

The woman's body at this pivotal moment of the play is secretive and unreadable. The other characters strongly doubt Maggie's announcement and have a compelling reason to believe she is lying; furthermore, she cannot produce any evidence of her pregnancy. No one can disprove her claim, however, and at least one other character wants it to be true, so the lie is allowed to stand, the unreadability of the pregnant body declared by Maggie's announcement as much as any pregnancy is. Maggie's coup also hinges on a moment of reproductive liminality tied to that unreadable female body: the play ends during the short window of time during which Maggie could become pregnant and, if she does, succeed in making her lie forever unprovable and irrelevant.

This climactic moment points to some of the ways a declaration of pregnancy can function within fiction, and specifically the ways strategic deployments of this information can reveal and distribute power. The scene of Maggie's announcement positions her as triumphant, or at least as a cat who lands on her feet: her careful use of the pregnancy announcement places her in a position of relative power—over Gooper and Mae, Big Daddy, and even Brick, who has now been enrolled into her scheme against his will and at the close of play seems to be prepared to help her "make the lie true" (133). Maggie's winning strategy centers on secrecy and knowledge: what is certain, what is deniable, what is provable, and what can be made true after the fact. If knowledge is power, pregnancy bestows tremendous power on the pregnant, possibly pregnant, or unknowably pregnant woman at the moment of such revelation. Maggie's position is precarious, however. Once the official announcement has been made, the pregnant character effectively relinquishes all privacy and a great deal of her power from that point forward. Gooper asks for the name of Maggie's doctor to confirm the pregnancy, and although she refuses in the moment, she knows she must eventually submit to his demands for proof to hold onto what her announcement has temporarily bought her.[34]

Maggie's announcement and Gooper's demands for proof further demonstrate the ways pregnancy can facilitate literary engagement with themes of privacy and surveillance. Although characters like Gooper might feel authorized to investigate a pregnant woman's sex life and medical history, such investigations are typically portrayed as invasions of privacy; in *Cat*, such

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[34] Maggie's claim also plays with the way an announcement of pregnancy can function as a speech act, bringing into public being the state it names, like swearing an oath. Typically a pregnancy announcement operates to bring the pregnancy into being as a social reality and not a biological one, but in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by making the announcement first and then moments later insisting to Brick that they will "make the lie true," Maggie uses the public declaration to ensure Brick's cooperation (133). By claiming she is pregnant, she creates the circumstances that will allow her to become pregnant, and in that sense her announcement functions as a "perlocutionary" act, almost an "illocutionary" one (Austin).

invasions have been an ongoing annoyance throughout the play. Readers and audiences no doubt find Big Mama unforgivably nosy in her frequent intrusions into Maggie and Brick's bedroom and pointed questions about their sex life. Maggie's opinion—and it is one with which the audience is likely sympathetic—is that what she and Brick do or don't do in their bedroom is private. When she locks a door in the first act and Big Mama comes barging through a different one, announcing "I hate locked doors in a house," Maggie replies, "I've noticed you do Big Mama, but people have got to have *some* moments of privacy, don't they?" Big Mama counters, "No ma'am, not in *my* house" (28-9, italics in original).

The setting of the play is indeed quite open: the action takes place in Maggie and Brick's "bed-sitting-room," which is surrounded by doors to a bathroom and a hallway as well as two large double doors opening onto a gallery, transoms above all doors, and walls that "should dissolve mysteriously into air; the set should be roofed by the sky" (Williams, "Notes for the Designer" 6). Against this backdrop, however, the characters of the play hold a number of secrets: not only Maggie's fake pregnancy and Brick's sexuality, but Big Daddy's illness, which until the end of Act Two is kept from him by his doctor and family. In the case of Big Daddy's health it seems almost criminal that the family hides the truth, but when it comes to Brick's and Maggie's secrets, the play is more forgiving. Brick refuses definitively to settle the question of his sexuality, either by coming out or by more convincingly performing heterosexuality, and that decision is portrayed as understandable and even liberatory. Robert J. Corber, situating the play in its Cold War context, argues that, "[i]n *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the closet emerges as a space in which not only gay men but also Communists and other groups targeted by the national-security apparatus can find political refuge while continuing to engage in their subversive

activities" (117). Like a closeted character, a pregnant character bears the burden but also holds the power of a secret. Brick and Maggie both seize that power by keeping secrets—Brick through silence, and Maggie through misinformation.

Even if we side with Maggie in her requests for privacy, though, her relationship with the other characters also parallels a text's relationship with its audience. Readers and viewers might condemn violations of Maggie and Brick's privacy, but they simultaneously feel authorized to perpetrate such violations themselves, as readers. Like Big Daddy, telling Brick that Mae and Gooper listen from the next room and "give reports to Big Mama" that Brick refuses to sleep in the same bed with Maggie, we condemn characters' "spying" with one breath but ask "[i]s that true or not?" with the next (63). The characters surrounding Maggie and Brick function as stand-ins for the play's audience, reading the couple's every move to uncover more information. If we agree with Big Daddy's condemnations of nosiness and spying, then to a certain extent we condemn our own relationship with the play.

The textual history of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* bears out this argument: unsatisfied with several elements of the original third act, Elia Kazan, the director of the original production, asked Tennessee Williams for a rewrite. According to Williams, in the rewritten version he satisfied two of Kazan's requests—he brought Big Daddy back instead of letting him disappear after Act Two, and he made Maggie more sympathetic—but he refused to comply with the third request, that, in Williams's words, "Brick should undergo some apparent mutation as a result of the virtual vivisection that he undergoes in his interview with his father in Act Two" ("Note of Explanation" 135). Williams insists in a "Note of Explanation" included in some print editions of the play that "I felt that the moral paralysis of Brick was a root thing in his tragedy, and to show

a dramatic progression would obscure the meaning of that tragedy in him" (135). In asking for a "mutation" after Brick's "revelatory" "vivisection," Kazan was asking Williams to resolve the question of Brick's sexuality—Kazan insisted that he (and the audience) have the right to know the whole truth about Brick. Williams countered this claim with a revised third act that only reiterates and strengthens his characters' rights to privacy. Corber argues that "Brick makes love with Maggie at the end of the play not because he has undergone a moral transformation and is no longer homosexual"—or, I would insert, as proof to the audience and his family that he never was homosexual—"but because he refuses to relinquish the protection afforded by the closet" (132). Whereas in the original third act Brick is silent on the subject of Maggie's supposed pregnancy, in the revised version he leaps to her defense, repeatedly asking Mae, "How do you know?" when she insists the couple has not been sleeping together, and, once they are alone, telling Maggie that he "admire[s]" her (169-70, 172).

Cat's insistence on ambiguity and privacy, and its condemnation of spying and prying famously make it a powerful rejoinder to Kazan's 1954 film *On the Waterfront* (itself frequently read as a parable for and justification of Kazan's cooperation with the House Un-American Activities Committee[35]). What's more, the play's defense of secrecy over transparency also makes it a provocative metacommentary on the reading process itself, insisting that readers and audiences do not have the right to unfettered access to characters' inner lives—a bizarre claim when the objects of reader investigations are fictional, nonexistent "people" created precisely for our enjoyment. In this light, the play's deployment of pregnancy at the climactic moment is fitting: like communism or homosexuality, pregnancy is a state that can be hidden or revealed,

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[35] See Ronald Briley, Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, and Charles J. Maland for examples of this reading.

suspected or proven; it is also a private facet of subjectivity in which outside others and the public at large have a vested interest. And like communism and homosexuality, pregnancy is a protected secret in this play, while those who would intrude upon its mysteries are condemned.

What sets *Cat* apart from the other texts of this chapter is that is not centrally "about" pregnancy. Williams enrolls pregnancy into the same category of closet experiences as homosexuality and communism in one climactic moment, and aligning it so makes an empowering statement on behalf of pregnant characters within the context of this pro-privacy play. The novels I will examine in the rest of this chapter, in contrast, engage pregnancy more directly and comprehensively, and therefore face a harder task: they must grapple with the political and literary difficulties of representing fetuses as characters.

Privacy, Visuality, Temporality

In cultural representations of pregnancy, there are a number of common tropes that present political sticking points, potentially making any representation of pregnancy a participant in debates about abortion and fetal personhood, wittingly or not. These potential pitfalls include invasions into pregnant characters' privacy sanctioned by the reading or viewing relationship, visual rhetoric borrowed from fetal ultrasound examinations, and the reification of a teleological view of pregnancy. While specific to representations of pregnancy, these three tropes also speak to the larger issue of the politics of projection in relationships of affective empathy.

Prose narrative seems especially hospitable for these tropes because of the nature of fiction itself. An investigative urge to find more information and uncover secrets seems to be an inherent and sanctioned part of reading fiction, and that urge complements a similar cultural

approach toward pregnancy that understands it as a public rather than private matter, and therefore subject to public inquiry and intervention. Since the advent of ultrasound technology as a ubiquitous presence in North American culture even outside of medical examinations, it has been difficult to escape its imagery even in a written medium—any physical, visual description of a fetus borrows from ultrasound imagery. (Additionally, in any pregnancy story set in the age of the ultrasound it seems inevitable that sooner or later the pregnant character will have an ultrasound examination performed, and that it will be a significant event in the pregnancy plot.) Finally, pregnancy is easily appropriated as a plot line itself: the timeline of pregnancy, with its set-piece scenes of conception, discovery, revelation, quickening, and birth, is a readymade story, with rising action, climax, and denouement. In addition to the metaphorical and symbolic richness pregnancy lends to any text in which it appears,[36] such a story has a dramatic and predictable plot built into it, as well as a convenient way to signal the passage of time.

I read these three specific tropes as politically charged because they all rhetorically separate the fetus from the pregnant woman by bestowing a certain amount of autonomous personhood on the fetus. Intrusions into the pregnant woman's privacy (within fiction and outside it) are condoned when they are understood as actions undertaken on the fetus's behalf, a belief that implies that a fetus has interests separate from those of the woman gestating it, and that outside actors might have better access to and understanding of those interests than the

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[36] Most obviously, pregnancy suggests and reinforces literary themes of new beginnings, growth, development, nurture, progression, and coming to fruition, and pregnancy and the figure of the fetus can be conceived of as empty pages upon which to write, clay to be molded, or blank slates upon which to project one's own hopes and desires. Numerous authors and poets, including Plato, Ovid, William Shakespeare, Anne Bradstreet, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, T. S. Eliot, Denise Levertov, and Erica Jong, have also grafted metaphors of pregnancy onto the writing process itself, by describing gestating their ideas, giving birth to their work, and loving their books like children. And as Mark Rose observes, legal decisions have even been based on an assumed similarity between authors and mothers, applying intellectual property law to questions of parentage in a reversal of the metaphor of authors as mothers.

woman in question.[37] Ultrasound imagery, especially when it appears outside of medical contexts, has a way of making the fetus appear more autonomous than it really is, and makes the woman's body the setting and backdrop of the pregnancy picture rather than a coequal presence and actor within it.[38] And while pregnancy does have a predictable timeline of development, the reification of a teleological understanding of reproduction—in which sex is assumed automatically to lead to pregnancy, pregnancy is assumed automatically to lead to birth, and birth is assumed automatically to lead to parenthood—collapses the beginning of pregnancy with its end. This collapse produces a "narrative in which the pregnant woman is cast in advance as already a mother embarked on a life trajectory of mothering," "a Hegelian telos that dictates the proper role of the female subject," and a logic whereby fertilized eggs and babies can be thought of as ontologically and legally identical (Berlant "America" 148, Stabile 185). In legal contexts, rigidly temporalizing pregnancy also enables an incremental encroachment on pregnant people's citizenship and personhood. Understanding pregnancy as a liminal, embodied state of two-in-oneness is as uncomfortable as it is accurate. Dividing pregnancy into discrete blocks of time with unalterable boundaries attempts to reaffirm the Western tenet of "one body, one person" by reducing pregnancy's uncomfortable liminality to the shortest period possible, reducing the

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[37] Laura Tropp argues that pregnancy has become a public spectacle through technological and media interventions; the results of this shift from private to public have included a widespread belief that "public intervention into the maternal-fetal relationship on behalf of the fetus is socially, medically, and legally justified" (141). Lauren Berlant argues, "The emergence of fetal personhood as a legal and medical category, and as a site of cultural fantasy, has been a major stimulus for thinking anew about what citizenship means as an identity category and what it implies for the theory and practice of national identity" ("America" 150). It is through its status as "the most perfect unbroken example" of citizenship as "superpersonhood" that the fetus takes on a public presence and significance (Berlant "America" 148).

[38] Alice E. Adams, Rosalind Petchesky, Laurie Shrage, Zoë Sofia, and Carol Stabile have analyzed the ways the image of the detached and solitary fetus borrowed from ultrasound examinations eclipses any thought or sight of the pregnant woman who should surround it, and render her uterus a blank background.

pregnant person's legal rights and agency in the process.[39] The codification of the pregnancy timeline in medical contexts also supports the view that pregnancy is a medical condition in need of management and intervention when it does not conform to that timeline.[40]

All of these rhetorical moves that sever fetus from pregnant woman also make bids for affective empathy with the fetus. This bid for empathy, occurring alongside and through rhetorical moves of separation, is truly a bid for empathy with the fetus *instead of the woman*. I am not arguing that any text or image employing these tropes is intentionally antiabortion or pro-fetal personhood. But tropes that cultivate affective empathy with fetuses are inevitably associated with those political movements because they have been purposely and expertly used by those movements for political purposes.[41] Given the political minefield surrounding representations of pregnancy, the question becomes: is it possible to write a pregnancy story that doesn't further antiabortion politics, even if unintentionally? That is, is it possible to write fiction that calls for affective empathy with a fetus but not at the expense of the pregnant woman? Alternately, is it possible to write a pregnancy story that represents the fetus without attaching affective empathy to it?

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[39] See Robbie Davis-Floyd for a discussion of the philosophically and culturally liminal state of pregnancy, Susan Bordo and P. Lealle Ruhl for arguments about how this liminality plays out in Western legal systems' treatment of women, and Cinda Gault for an application of these ideas to *Surfacing*.

[40] Alice Adams documents the ways in which "[b]y the middle of the twentieth century, one branch of obstetrics was leaving behind the attitude of 'watchful expectancy' which had dominated the profession and following a trend toward 'active management of labor' for parturient women" (*One Divided* 75), a trend that dictated a very specific timeline for labor and delivery and proscribed a number of drugs and procedures to be used if labor proceeded too quickly or too slowly. See also Emily Martin, Susan Bordo, Kristin Luker, and Leslie Reagan for the ways this management approach to pregnancy has eroded women's legal rights.

[41] See for example the relatively recent crop of state laws in the United States mandating ultrasound examinations for any woman seeking an abortion, the purposes of which are a combination of "informed consent," implying that the woman does not have enough information about her pregnancy to make any decisions about it until she sees it visually, and an attempt to force empathy between a woman and her fetus (Godzeno, Sanger, Gold and Nash). The language doctors in South Dakota are legally required to read to women seeking abortions claims that the fetus is "a whole, separate, living, unique human being" (Lazzarini), reinforcing the link between representing the fetus as an autonomous person and requesting empathy for it at the expense of the pregnant woman.

Writing a fetal character as a rhetorical blank slate seems politically dangerous because it encourages readers to project onto that blank whatever they wish the fetus to be. Such a representation would allow observers to write the narrative of a pregnancy from outside of it, and in their quest to give a voice to the voiceless fetus, too easily ignore or seize the voice of the woman carrying it—in a sense, such a tactic cedes the task of representation from the writer to the reader. On the other hand, though, writing a fetus as a three-dimensional character with its own personality, agency, and agenda seems even more overtly to support notions of fetal personhood that pit fetuses against women. A third alternative seems to be to depict pregnancy in fiction in ways that more or less ignore the fetus altogether. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961) are examples of this kind of novel: in these stories women's pregnancies are significant plot points, but they serve primarily as crises or motivations for men in the books—as a side effect of not considering fetuses, these novels do not fully consider the women carrying them.[42] Related to this third strategy is a fourth, science fictional option of severing fetuses from women's bodies not only rhetorically but materially, by growing them in vats or tubes, as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan Saga (especially *Ethan of Athos*, 1986). This scientific breakthrough might be represented as horrific or utopian, freeing women from the dangers and drudgery of childbearing (Piercy) or freeing men from the necessity of women (Bujold), but

[42] *Revolutionary Road* even features a third-person close narrator who moves among several different characters, letting us into their inner lives in turn, but we only follow April at the very end of the novel, as she prepares to self-administer the abortion that will kill her—and even in this section the reader is given no access to April's thoughts or motivations, only the mundane logistics of preparing for the procedure.

ultimately it sidesteps the literary and political challenges of pregnancy by rendering pregnancy itself obsolete.

It is a political challenge, therefore, to write pregnancy fiction that does not perpetuate antiabortion rhetoric, at least unintentionally or through association, by using some of the same pregnancy story tropes. More importantly for this project, however, the challenge to write a different kind of pregnancy story raises narrative and literary questions about the relationship between reading and affective empathy. The distinction I make between *readerly empathy* and *affective empathy experienced while reading* has to do in part with the experience of casting oneself into characters. Readerly empathy (entanglement) is possible without any particular "feeling with" or "feeling into" characters; affective empathy is a relationship of emotional attachment, sympathy, and identification facilitated by *projection*.[43] Pregnancy literature provides a particularly apt case study for affective empathy, then. As Barbara Johnson famously argues in her study of apostrophe in abortion poetry, when an aborted fetus is the apostrophized other, the poetic technique not only raises thorny literary and philosophical questions; it also reveals the embedded politics of poetic and rhetorical techniques. Johnson asks, "[C]an the very essence of a political issue—an issue like, say, abortion—hinge on the structure of a [rhetorical] figure?" (184). She continues, "For if apostrophe is said to involve language's capacity to give life and human form to something dead or inanimate, what happens when those questions are literalized? What happens when the lyric speaker assumes responsibility for producing the death

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[43] Theodor Lipps explicitly describes empathy as functioning through a process of projection. In his definition of the term, empathy is "a psychological resonance phenomenon that is triggered in our perceptual encounter with external objects" (qtd. in Steuber "Empathy"). The resonance phenomena triggered are reminders of past experiences, but "[s]ince my attention is perceptually focused on the external object, I experience [those phenomena]—or I automatically project my experiences—as being in the object" (Lipps qtd. in Steuber "Empathy"). Steven Pinker and David S. Miall also write positively about the empathic possibilities of projecting ourselves into literature (cited in Hammond and Kim).

in the first place, but without being sure of the precise degree of human animation that existed in the entity killed?" (189). I wish to highlight here the way that apostrophe can be understood as a technique of explicit literary projection. Johnson argues that if apostrophe is an act of ventriloquism, the poet who employs it is casting himself into the absent or dead other in order to make such an address work, and is, in the end, speaking to himself. This act of projection is an intensification of what is always more or less the case for any poet or author putting words in a character's mouth—and both acts of ventriloquism are heightened versions of the mechanism of affective empathy even outside of fiction, rooted as it is in projection. In the case of fictional fetuses, the projection required by any bid for affective empathy, and the "real world" consequences of animating such figures, are simply raised to a point of high visibility.

Johnson concludes that Gwendolyn Brooks's abortion poem "The Mother" (1945) "attempts the impossible task of humanizing both the mother and the aborted children while presenting the inadequacy of language to resolve the dilemma without violence" (191). To reframe this chapter's research questions building on Johnson's analysis, then: is language inadequate for the task of humanizing both fetal and pregnant characters? Can such a task be accomplished without discursive violence? Furthermore, is it inevitable that affective empathy be assigned to characters in scenarios requiring this level of projection? Does all reading entail some projection, and does *readerly* empathy (when reading anything with characters) therefore automatically create *affective* empathy—do these two concepts collapse into each other? Since I choose to tease out their differences and discuss them separately, clearly I see some usefulness in at least treating them as though they are different empathic experiences; this chapter's readings provide one reason underpinning that logic. I argue that these texts work through this exact issue:

the kind and amount of affective empathy they necessarily produce simply by creating readerly empathy. The three pregnancy novels I study are concerned with the seemingly automatic affective empathy attached to fetuses in any representation of them. They intervene in the cultivation of such empathy by repurposing and revising the pregnancy story tropes of invaded privacy, visualized fetuses, and teleological pregnancy.

As shown in the example of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, intrusions into pregnant characters' privacy can take the form of readerly investigation and detective work as well as the presence of nosy characters. In the first main text of the chapter, Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), the horror of Rosemary's experience derives precisely from the wresting of knowledge and authority away from the pregnant woman by the people around her. Like *Cat*, this text also highlights pregnancy's narrative function as a mystery awaiting a solution, drawing attention to readerly practices of snooping and deduction. Because the reader investigates the pregnancy along with the pregnant woman and on her behalf, however, all acts of readerly nosiness and intrusion are condoned. *Rosemary's Baby* repurposes the pregnancy text's themes of secrecy and power while firmly attaching readers' affective empathy to the pregnant woman alone.

Next I move to Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) for its reclamation of the visualization of pregnancy. This novel makes clear the discursive violence and distortions of the technological gaze upon the fetus, portraying the rhetorical separation of fetus from maternal environment as a dismemberment of the woman herself. *Surfacing* reappropriates the power of visuality while emphasizing the simultaneous wholeness and permeability of the pregnant body. *Surfacing* further challenges the act and outcomes of empathic projection onto the rhetorically blank canvas of the fetus, offering instead a representation of pregnancy that resists projection.

The final reading of this chapter is of Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003), a novel in which a fetal character acts as observer, narrator, and even editor—not to mention time-traveler and goddess. While *Rosemary's Baby* and *Surfacing* seem to handle the political problem of assigning empathy to fetal characters by writing pregnancies in ways that sidestep or subvert that empathic bid, *The Salt Roads* imagines a fully sentient fetal character who tells her own story. Far from a rhetorical blank awaiting others' projections, this fetus projects her wishes onto and controls the adult characters she inhabits. *The Salt Roads* demonstrates a feminist way to breathe life into a fetal character, granting her personhood but never allowing that personhood to position her against the adult characters of the book or asking for empathy with the fetus at the expense of the women. *The Salt Roads* is able to achieve such a representation of pregnancy through its blend of explicitly non-realist genres and its revision of pregnancy's temporality. Rather than reinforcing a linear narrative, pregnancy's storytelling possibilities are put in the service of undoing a teleology.

Pregnancy narratives emerge by the end of this chapter as sometimes horrific, sometimes fantastic ruptures from within that transform but do not destroy or devalue the women who bear them. These pregnancy stories attempt alternate empathic projects rather than calling for affective empathy with the fetus at the expense of the pregnant woman. All three novels grapple with the dilemma of breathing life into fetal characters, a projection with seemingly inevitable political stakes, but one that is different only in effect and not in kind from the enterprise of breathing life into any fictional character.

Textual Detectives: *Rosemary's Baby*

Like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Ira Levin's 1967 novel *Rosemary's Baby* also features pregnancy's relationship to knowledge, secrecy, and power—and like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Rosemary's Baby* comes down on the side of the pregnant woman, making the case that she has rights to privacy and authority over her pregnancy. Unlike *Cat*, however, *Rosemary's Baby* makes that case by telling the story of a pregnant woman from whom knowledge—and therefore power and agency—are repeatedly and horrifically seized.

Rosemary's Baby tells the story of a young couple, Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse, who begin the novel by moving into the Bramford, a famous old New York City building with a dark history. Guy is a struggling actor and Rosemary is a housewife; they both want children, but Guy wants to wait until he has had more professional success. Shortly after moving into the Bramford, Rosemary and Guy are befriended by their elderly neighbors, the Castevets, and Guy begins spending more and more time with them. Then a fellow actor suddenly and inexplicably goes blind, and Guy takes over his part in a play; soon thereafter Guy agrees that it is time to have a baby. Rosemary becomes pregnant, and after his success in the play Guy begins receiving more offers for work. When Hutch, an old friend of Rosemary's, tries to warn her about her building and neighbors and then falls ill and dies, Rosemary's previous sense of unease turns into full-blown suspicion, and she begins to investigate. The last third of the book (and the end of Rosemary's pregnancy) ratchets up the suspense as Rosemary discovers that the Bramford houses a coven of Satanists and attempts to elude them, only to discover she cannot trust her doctor or husband either.[44]

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[44] The novel mixes elements of Satanism and witchcraft in its characterization of the antagonists.

The novel's themes of information and control, established before it is clear that Rosemary is at the center of a conspiracy—before she even becomes pregnant—soon come to focus on Rosemary's body and fertility. She thinks about the "undignified contest" she wages with Guy over pregnancy, a struggle in which she believes "he didn't even know they were engaged" (65). Rosemary claims she doesn't like hormonal birth control or "rubber gadgets"; Guy teases her that it's because she was raised Catholic (65). But since she ostensibly agrees with Guy that they are not ready for a baby, she posts a calendar on which she charts her fertility, and Guy uses this information to deny her sex on the "dangerous days" (65). Because she secretly does want a baby, Rosemary's plan is to become pregnant "accidentally," so she attempts to convince Guy it's safe to have sex when they both know it isn't. It never seems to occur to Rosemary not to share information about her menstrual and ovulatory cycle with her husband—or to lie. This dynamic of struggle over information concerning Rosemary's body continues through conception: when Guy announces to Rosemary that he is ready to have a baby he also tells her he has already checked the calendar and knows what day they will begin trying, and when Rosemary first suspects she is pregnant it is because Guy tells her that according to the calendar, her period is two days late—she hadn't noticed until he pointed it out, and when she objects that two days isn't that long, he counters that she has never been late before (75-6, 102-3). Next Rosemary goes to Dr. Hill for confirmation, and after a blood test he calls her on the phone to "give [her his] word" that she is pregnant, and to tell her she should make a reservation at the hospital, suggesting that the due date he has set is the authoritative date she will deliver (105). These early moments of the pregnancy externalize knowledge about Rosemary's most personal bodily functions and processes. Although it must be Rosemary who

writes details about her body on the calendar, the calendar (and its proper, male interpreters) are the authorities to whom she must then turn for readings of her fertility and pregnancy.

As Rosemary's pregnancy continues, so does the seizure of knowledge and control of her body—and the accompanying reinterpretation of her bodily sensations—by outsiders. On the suggestion of her neighbors, Rosemary switches her care to Dr. Sapirstein, who tells her,

> Please don't read books. … Every pregnancy is different, and a book that tells you what you're going to feel in the third week of the third month is only going to make you worry. No pregnancy was ever exactly like the ones described in the books. And don't listen to your friends either. They'll have had experiences very different from yours and they'll be absolutely certain that their pregnancies were the normal ones and that yours is abnormal. (115-6)

He adds that she should drink health shakes made by Mrs. Castevet instead of taking prenatal vitamins, and that she is to call only him with any questions or problems (116). Dr. Sapirstein reiterates his ban on any outside sources of knowledge (whether books or other women's experiential wisdom) when Rosemary complains of severe abdominal pain and voices a fear that it might indicate an ectopic pregnancy: "'Ectopic?' Dr. Sapirstein asked, and looked skeptically at her. She colored. He said, 'I thought you weren't going to read books, Rosemary'" (118). Rosemary's fears and physical discomfort continue, but she has learned her lesson: she stops complaining, and for the most part she accepts Dr. Sapirstein's interpretations of her experiences.

Although Dr. Sapirstein's edicts no doubt strike contemporary readers as huge red flags, indicating that he cannot be trusted and is part of the conspiracy to keep Rosemary in the dark about the nature of her pregnancy, it is also believable that Rosemary does not question him.

After all, Rosemary is reassured rather than offended when Guy allays her fears by telling her that if something were wrong with her pregnancy, Dr. Sapirstein "would certainly tell *me*" (143, italics in original), and even Dr. Hill, who knows nothing of the coven, betrays Rosemary when she comes to him for help by calling Guy and Dr. Sapirstein (211). When Dr. Sapirstein arrives to forcibly take her home, he threatens to commit Rosemary to a mental hospital if she makes any more trouble, and while restraining her back at her apartment, he says, "wait a minute now; *we* happen to be in labor here," and unilaterally makes the decision to drug her and not to take her to a hospital (211, 215, emphasis added). Of course the coven behaves this way to further their dastardly plan, but the mainstream believability and acceptability of a pregnant woman being denied information and options is part of what allows the coven to hide in plain sight.[45]

Against this backdrop of Rosemary's horrific lack of authority over her own pregnant body, the novel's narrative perspective facilitates a powerful critique of medical practices that have such effects. This perspective, which stays close to Rosemary throughout the text, also allows the novel to take up the role of pregnancy as a storytelling device by aligning Rosemary and the reader as detectives, finding clues and piecing together a puzzle together. The horror readers experience is on Rosemary's behalf—the dread and fear that characterize the book's tone provide a glimmer of what she herself feels. As in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, pregnancy acts as a public mystery hidden in an intimate way, inside a body. It is a circumstance requiring investigation and intrusions into privacy, acting as an analogy for the reading experience in general. Instead of aligning readers with characters who would use uncovered information to hurt and control the pregnant woman, though, like Mae and Big Mama in *Cat, Rosemary's Baby*

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[45] *Rosemary's Baby*'s depiction of knowledge and control being seized from a pregnant woman is not that far from the realities of mid-twentieth century American medicalized pregnancy and birth. For more on this topic, see Leslie Reagan, Susan Bordo, and especially Alice E. Adams.

makes the pregnant woman herself the detective character, and in the process aligns the reader's investigative urges with Rosemary's own. Now all readerly nosiness and intrusion are condoned by the text, because readers are gaining information on behalf of the pregnant woman, in an attempt to restore authority to her.

When Rosemary asks Guy about the odd arrangement of furniture and belongings in the Castavets' apartment, marks on the walls that reveal recently removed pictures, and the fact that they don't seem to use several of their rooms, Guy calls her "nosy" and ends the conversation—but these are precisely the kinds of details readers notice, and questions we want answered (64). When Rosemary receives a book from Hutch, with a deathbed message about an anagram, we read passages of the book along with her, connect the same dots she does, and perhaps even solve the anagram before she does (171-5). In this pivotal scene in which Rosemary learns her neighbor's true identity and is presented with evidence of his ties to Satanism, Rosemary is not merely a detective, but a *textual* detective, her most important clues coming from a book and from Scrabble tiles, which she rearranges to solve the anagram. In these moments, Rosemary's reading draws attention to her pregnancy as the text truly in need of interpretation, and enlists the help of readers of the book to understand it.

Despite the comparatively comfortable position of *Rosemary's Baby*'s readers, intruding into a character's privacy for a good cause, there are moments when the narrative draws attention to the inevitable split between readers' perspective and Rosemary's. Although Rosemary's lack of control over her pregnancy is condemned, it is also sensationalized for our entertainment. And although readers are rarely positioned in such a way as to be complicit with the characters who would harm Rosemary, the necessities of storytelling do occasionally push us into such a

position. Readers' own lack of agency over what we know when and what we're able to do with that information is at times used to cultivate affective empathy with Rosemary, but is also used to propel the narrative and the reading experience along at Rosemary's expense.

There are many times during the book when the reader is fully "with" Rosemary, when the narrative perspective places readers very close to her position and enables us to experience the events of the novel alongside her, our presumed emotional responses reflecting hers. Readers enter Rosemary's thoughts in moments when she is alone—"She stood capless and immobile under the downpour, waiting for her head to clear and her thoughts to find an order and conclusion. Had last night really been, as Guy had put it, Baby Night? Was she now, at this moment, actually pregnant?" (93)—and in asides to herself while she is with others—"The Weeses and the Gilmores came, and Mrs. Sabatini with her cat Flash, and Dr. Shand. (How had Guy known that it was Dr. Shand who played the recorder? Rosemary wondered. And that it was a recorder, not a flute or a clarinet? She would have to ask him)" (186). That said, the use of free indirect style in many of these moments indicates both access to Rosemary's thoughts and a certain distance between the character and the novel's narrative voice—and consequently, a similar juxtaposition of closeness and distance in readers' relationships with Rosemary. As Herman Rapaport argues, free indirect discourse "is intended to show what someone is in the process of thinking to himself or herself as opposed to someone communicating something to another person"; in this sense the technique collapses the distinction between "the telling and the happening" and creates a sense of readerly closeness to the text (78-9). Nevertheless, Barbara Johnson citing Henry Louis Gates argues that in free indirect discourse, "the boundaries between narrator and character, between standard and individual, are both transgressed *and*

preserved" ("Metaphor" 125, emphasis added), and Daniel P. Gunn claims that in Jane Austen's use of free indirect discourse, the strategy is compatible with and not subversive of her narrators' ironic commentary on their characters. That *Rosemary's Baby* is narrated in close third person (including moments of free indirect discourse) rather than first person suggests that the text seeks to highlight readers' position as close to Rosemary but not immersed within her consciousness.

Furthermore, for every moment of being with Rosemary, there are other moments of being positioned both with and without her, especially through the novel's use of stream of consciousness. The most significant and troubling scenes in which we are aware of being submerged into Rosemary's thoughts and perceptions but simultaneously making more or different sense of them than she does are two dream sequences. The first begins with Rosemary falling asleep and seeing the face of Terry, a young girl who had been taken in by the Castevets and who has recently died under mysterious circumstances. The narration includes a moment when Rosemary stirs and partially wakes, "see[s] Terry's pulped face," and then returns to the same dream (42).

> [S]he was at Our Lady. Sister Agnes was shaking her fist at her, ousting her from leadership of the second-floor monitors. 'Sometimes I wonder how come you're the leader of *anything*!' she said. A bump on the other side of the wall woke Rosemary, and Mrs. Castevet said, 'And please don't tell me what Laura-Louise said because I'm not interested!' Rosemary turned over and burrowed into her pillow.
>
> Sister Agnes was furious. … 'If you'd listened to *me*, we wouldn't have *had* to do it!' Sister Agnes cried in a hoarse midwestern bray. 'We'd have been all set to go now instead of starting all over from scratch!' Uncle Mike tried to hush her. He was the

> principal of Our Lady, which was connected by passageways to his body shop in South Omaha. 'I *told* you not to tell her anything in advance,' Sister Agnes continued lower, piggy-eyes glinting hatefully at Rosemary. 'I *told* you she wouldn't be open-minded. Time enough *later* to let her in on it.' (42-3)

Although the dream is relayed in such a way that we follow Rosemary's subconscious associations and leaps between settings and characters, and knowledge is presented the way it often is in dreams, so Rosemary just knows why Sister Agnes is angry without her explicitly saying it, readers know more about what is going on at this moment than Rosemary does. The narration includes Rosemary briefly waking and identifying the voice of Mrs. Castevet specifically so that the reader knows Rosemary is hearing actual voices through her bedroom wall and incorporating them into her dream. The image of Terry's face also suggests who the "her" is in Mrs. Castevet's cryptic statements, the inclusion of "passageways" foreshadows the discovery of a secret passage between Rosemary's apartment and the Castevets', and the detail of Sister Agnes's "hoarse midwestern bray" recalls two earlier descriptions of Mrs. Castevet's voice as a "hoarse midwestern bray" and a "midwestern bray" (24, 25). The narration of this scene manages to place readers both inside Rosemary's head and outside it, since, because she is asleep, Rosemary is not aware of what she is really hearing. Her observations and sensations are treated as raw data for which Rosemary's mind is the transmitter—her dreaming provides a kind of automatic writing, passing along messages without registering them.[46]

This early dream sequence is important in its own right, establishing Minnie and Roman Castevet's complicity in Terry's death, but it also prepares readers for a far more disturbing

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[46] In this sense, Rosemary's dream sequences operate similarly to the use of stream of consciousness by some modernist authors, particularly Gertrude Stein, whose prior research into automatic writing is reflected in the narrative voice of *Three Lives* (1909) (Glass).

dream to come. The night Guy and Rosemary are to begin trying to conceive, Mrs. Castevet interrupts a romantic dinner to bring them chocolate mousse for dessert. Although it tastes horrible, Guy insists Rosemary eat it so as not to be rude; Rosemary hides most of it in her napkin and therefore does not get a full dose of the sedative it contains. Nevertheless, Rosemary feels faint and sleepy after dinner, and Guy puts her to bed. What follows is a mixture of what is really happening and what Rosemary dreams: she is aware of Guy undressing her, but she also imagines she is on a yacht with the President and First Lady. Then,

> Guy was taking off her wedding ring. She wondered why, but was too tired to ask. "Sleep," she said, and slept.
>
> It was the first time the Sistine Chapel had been opened to the public and she was inspecting the ceiling on a new elevator that carried the visitor through the chapel horizontally, making it possible to see the frescoes exactly as Michelangelo, painting them, had seen them. How glorious they were! She saw God extending his finger to Adam, giving him the divine spark of life; and the underside of a shelf partly covered with gingham contact paper as she was carried backward through the linen closet. "Easy," Guy said, and another man said, "You've got her too high." (87)

As in the earlier scene, readers are able to piece together what is really happening to Rosemary—she is being carried through the linen closet's secret passageway to the Castevets' apartment—even while experiencing Rosemary's distorted and only somewhat conscious perceptions. Next Rosemary dreams that she receives a message of stormy weather that she is to take back to the people still on the yacht—and then, abruptly, she is aware of her neighbors staging a black mass, and she describes it exactly as it is, recognizing faces, chanting, and candles. She climbs onto a

bed and imagines Jackie Kennedy tying her down, followed by Guy "making love to her" (89). She describes his hands as "hot and sharp-nailed," and includes other disturbing details of the encounter, but as before turns them to fit her dreamscape. At one point she opens her eyes, sees the demonic figure on top of her and a crowd of observers, and thinks, "*This is no dream*. … *This is real, this is happening*" (89, italics in original). After the realization, though, Rosemary falls back asleep and does not regain consciousness until the next day.

In this scene Rosemary moves between two mental states, sometimes aware that she is being raped and wanting to protest, and sometimes believing Guy is "making love to her" and incorporating that belief into her dreams. These two mental states suggest the two simultaneous states of the reader, experiencing the scene from within Rosemary's perspective but also better equipped to figure out what is really happening than she is. As in the prior dream, Rosemary is at times an unconscious transmitter of data for our interpretation, but here she also experiences moments of near lucidity during which we are shown details we are to take literally despite their occurrence in the midst of a dream sequence. Readers know that the trip through the closet, the assembled neighbors, and the public rape really happen just as surely as we know that Rosemary does not go sailing with John and Jackie Kennedy. Unfortunately, our inability to do anything for her, coupled with our partial split from Rosemary's perspective, position us with the onlookers and make us complicit in the assault. Our partial alignment with Rosemary maintains our connection to her, however, so even as witnesses of the scene from outside of Rosemary's perspective, readers are asked to project themselves into her in a gesture of affective empathy.

These dream sequences are the most vivid examples of the split position readers of *Rosemary's Baby* experience, but as the story progresses there are other, smaller moments when

we figure out pieces of the book's central mystery before Rosemary does, and this difference in knowledge facilitates readers' awareness of their divided position. Readers certainly know about Guy's involvement in the coven before Rosemary does: in addition to his participation in the Black Mass, Guy seems distant or jumpy, spends time alone with the Castevets, pounces on the phone when it rings, and comes and goes at odd times. None of this behavior strikes Rosemary as odd because she trusts him, but readers inevitably notice it simply because it is included in the narration. As with the dreams, Rosemary acts as transmitter, subconsciously registering these details and passing them along to readers so that we consciously think about them long before she does. When Rosemary throws a party to which she only invites her former friends (no neighbors), at one point she finds herself barricaded in the kitchen with her girlfriends, who refuse to let Guy join them and interrogate her about her ailing health and tyrannical doctor. Rosemary admits how much pain she is in and agrees to see Dr. Hill for a second opinion. The sense of triumph at this moment is short-lived, however: after the party she tells Guy about her plan, and about the fact that she has stopped drinking the health shakes Mrs. Castevet makes her. Already knowing of Guy's part in the coven, readers might be frustrated but will not be surprised when Guy lashes out, calling her friends "not-very-bright *bitches* who ought to mind their own God-damned business" and insisting that she not see any doctor but Dr. Sapirstein (159, emphasis in original). Similarly, after the exhilaration of watching over Rosemary's shoulder as she reads Hutch's book and solves the anagram, readers despair when Guy comes home and Rosemary tells him everything—and cannot help but notice (as Rosemary does not) that Guy's first reaction upon hearing Roman Castevet's true identity is a calm "Who told you?" (176).

These moments, in which readers empathize with Rosemary but are also made aware of the split between reader and character created by the narrative point of view, provide much of the conflict of the novel, as well as a tone of anxiety, frustration, and despair. There are still other moments, however, when another variation on the reader-character relationship takes over, to a much more positive effect. At times, rather than the reader figuring things out before Rosemary and wishing for her catch up, Rosemary manages to keep secrets even from the reader, and it is these moments that build into the story small windows of hope. For example, Rosemary's food cravings grow ever stranger until one day she catches a sight of her reflection and realizes she is eating a raw chicken heart. She vomits into the sink. We are then told, "When she was finished she drank some water, washed her face and hands, and cleaned the inside of the sink with the spray attachment. She turned off the water and dried herself and stood for awhile, thinking; and then she got a memo pad and a pencil from one of the drawers and went to the table and sat down and began to write" (145). Next comes a section break, after which Guy arrives home from work and Rosemary announces that they are having a party—readers learn of Rosemary's plan to break free of her isolation within the Bramford coven at the same time that Guy does.

On the day of the party, Rosemary successfully rebuffs Minnie Castevet's intrusions by pointedly telling her that she is not invited to the party, and that she doesn't need her help. She insists Minnie leave the shake she has brought over instead of watching Rosemary drink it because she is in the middle of preparing for the party, and says "I get very nervous if anyone watches me while I'm cooking" (148). Just as readers have no idea what Rosemary writes on her memo pad until she announces the party, in this scene we are not given any indication whether Rosemary is being honest with Minnie or not. After Minnie leaves, we watch as Rosemary pours

the drink down her kitchen sink. These tiny moments of triumph provide readers with hope on Rosemary's behalf precisely by allowing her to keep secrets, even from us. They also reassure readers that we are still on Rosemary's side, even as she occasionally shuts us out—after all, we enjoy her cleverness and guile the same way we do Maggie's at the end of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Rosemary's final gesture of resistance begins with such a moment: after Rosemary is restrained and drugged during labor, she is told upon waking that her baby is dead. She can hear crying through the apartment wall, however, and she suspects that the breastmilk she has been pumping is being fed to the baby, and not, as her guards have told her, discarded. Rosemary finally contrives to drug the woman watching her and sneak into the neighboring apartment to rescue her baby, who she believes the coven plans to sacrifice. As she begins to execute this plan, Rosemary reveals, "And she was one up on them. Because she knew—and they didn't *know* she knew—that there was a secret way from the one apartment to the other. … It *was* the linen closet. In a dream long ago she had been carried through it. That had been no dream" (228, emphasis in original). The "they" who "didn't *know* she knew" perfectly describes readers of the novel as well as the coven; Rosemary is one up on *us*. Rather than let readers learn of her plan as it unfolds, however, the narrator shares Rosemary's knowledge of the passageway in advance, to return us to a perspective more closely aligned with her. Although readers are positioned with the coven at moments like these, in that Rosemary is "one up on [us]," we are brought back into alignment with her quickly enough that our affective empathy never shifts away from her, making the moments when she seems to have outsmarted us exhilarating.

The overall narrative strategy of the novel establishes an alliance between Rosemary and the reader so that pregnancy remains a text to be read, but the intrusiveness of our reading is

repurposed and condoned, and does not contradict the project of establishing affective empathy for Rosemary. *Rosemary's Baby* is a reclamation of the pregnancy story's intrusions into privacy and staging of the pregnant body as a public spectacle, because it takes our investigative impulses as readers and puts them in the service of the pregnant woman rather than pitting us against her. Furthermore, the reading experience is often most hopeful when the narrative shields Rosemary from our prying eyes, and most frustrating when we are aware of knowing more about a pregnancy than the pregnant woman does: the text asks us to respect and celebrate a fictional character's privacy. What emerges in *Rosemary's Baby* is a method for cultivating and reinforcing readers' affective empathy with a pregnant character by almost putting readers "in her shoes," but simultaneously making readers aware of the fact that they are outside her situation and must project themselves into those shoes.

Rosemary's Baby handles the conundrum of affective empathy for fetal characters by making Rosemary's fetus a rhetorical blank, but making that blank horrific, even evil, and therefore making the fetus a viable candidate for projection but not empathy. In this novel there is never a question of choosing between empathy for Rosemary and empathy for her fetus. Rosemary even highlights the dangers of projecting our own assumptions and hopes onto a pregnancy by incorrectly displacing the central "blank" of the story onto her neighbors. Although she rightly deduces that they want her baby, she is mistaken about one key detail: Rosemary had believed the witches planned to use her baby as a sacrifice, but in the final scene she learns that the baby is actually the next coming of the Devil himself, and that the coven worships him. Rosemary projects her worst fears onto the coven, but the truth is far worse, and the blank she should have been concerned with was the fetus itself. That the coven projected their agenda onto

the fetus makes them despicable to readers; that it never occurs to Rosemary that others would do such a thing makes her all the more sympathetic.

Finally, *Rosemary's Baby* retains the use of pregnancy as a convenient storytelling timeline, with a built-in beginning, middle, and ending, but Rosemary seems only to have any agency while pregnant. After the baby is born, Rosemary intends to rescue it; when she sees the baby and finally learns the whole truth, that plan proves pointless. As soon as she enters the room where the baby lies, Rosemary seems to succumb to a kind of trance: after momentarily thinking of killing the infant, she instead finds herself, almost against her conscious will, cooing and talking to the baby while adjusting his clothing and rocking the bassinet. "No, she *couldn't* throw him out the window," the narration reports. "He was her baby, no matter who the father was" (240, 241, emphasis in original). One of the most truly horrifying supernatural phenomena of this novel turns out to be Rosemary's maternal instincts. Readers get a taste of what's in store for Rosemary when she eats raw meat without realizing it, seemingly under her fetus's influence, but once she sees the baby she is utterly powerless and the coven has won. What makes this final turn of events one of the most chilling is the sudden severing of the reader's attachment to Rosemary in these final moments. Our affective empathy for Rosemary, facilitated by our narrative link to her perspective, breaks down at the moment she extends empathy to her baby.

Making Pregnancy Visible: *Surfacing*

Rosemary's Baby answers the challenge of representing pregnancy without doing discursive harm to the pregnant woman by making affective empathy with the fetal character unthinkable, even monstrous: readers cannot empathize with this fetus even after he is born, or with Rosemary

after she becomes attached to him. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) answers this same challenge by making the fetus an object of clinical interest only, subverting the role of visual technology in cultivating affective empathy by pushing that discourse to the point where its scientific associations work against it. The fetal ultrasound image becomes an agent of distance rather than closeness, and the fetus is once again rendered an unthinkable empathetic object.

The novel begins in a mode of detached observation. An unnamed protagonist travels to a remote Canadian island in search of her missing father, bringing her lover, Joe, and another couple, David and Anna, along with her. The protagonist frequently feels emotionally and communicatively cut off from her companions, claiming, "My friends' pasts are vague to me and to each other also, any one of us could have amnesia for year [sic] and the others wouldn't notice" (26). She describes herself, thinking:

> I didn't feel awful; I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time. Perhaps I'd been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or without a sense of touch; but if that was true I wouldn't have noticed the absence. At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase… . Bottles distort for the observer too: frogs in the jam jar stretched wide, to them watching I must have appeared grotesque. (106)

The narration is disjointed and affectively barren, corresponding with the protagonist's state of mind. The book is also rich with symbols of babies and pregnancy, however, including numerous mentions of eggs, paired colors of pink and baby blue, and vaginal descriptions of nature, such as a sunset that is "red, a tulip color paling to flesh webs, membrane" (163). It is no surprise, then,

that as the story progresses, the protagonist recovers the memory of a past abortion, an event she had repressed and rewritten in her mind. The protagonist's emotionless tone thaws as she begins to "tingl[e] like a foot that's been asleep" and increasingly rejects rationality in favor of intuition and instinct (147). Her search for her father takes on mythic qualities as she begins to see secret messages and codes in the notes he has left behind, and she acts according to rituals and rules she discerns in the woods and lake near her father's cabin. She pushes away her companions and lives alone, naked, outdoors for several days. The book ends with the protagonist feeling that she has come to the end of her quest by making contact with the spirits of her parents, and by becoming pregnant again.

Surfacing's various invocations of pregnancy weave together a thematic obsession with wholeness, permeability, and personhood, and an emphasis on technologically mediated visual imagery. The uses of ultrasound technology during pregnancy were first developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and were widely used for fetal diagnostic imaging in North America and Europe by the mid-1970s (Sanger). Even before many North American women experienced such technology themselves, they encountered fetal ultrasound images. A famous 1962 issue of the magazine *Look* contained "the now-standard sequence of [ultrasound] pictures at one day, one week, seven weeks, and so on," and ever since then images of fetuses have permeated popular culture and made their influence felt even in literary representations of pregnancy (Petchesky 268, Adams *Reproducing* 119). In addition to their diagnostic function, ultrasound images are used outside (and inside) medical settings to inspire awe at our technological abilities, to create affective empathy for the fetuses depicted, and to visually, rhetorically, and affectively separate the fetus from its maternal environment, often explicitly, as part of an antiabortion cultural

strategy (Petchesky 268, 275, 277; Shrage 66, 70). Even pregnant women who desire ultrasounds are separated discursively from their pregnancies by the technology, positioned with those who gaze rather than that which is gazed upon, despite it being their own internal organs on display (Petchesky 279-86, Hubbard 350, Rothman 113-5, Treichler, Cartwright, and Penley 5, 11). The rhetorical separation effected by such visualization calls for viewer identification and empathy with the fetus at the expense of the pregnant woman's personhood—even, at times, her existence. Petchesky explains, "The strategy of antiabortionists to make fetal personhood a self-fulfilling prophecy by making the fetus a *public presence* addresses a visually oriented culture. Meanwhile, finding 'positive' images and symbols of abortion hard to imagine, feminists and other prochoice advocates have all too readily ceded the visual terrain" (264). When fetuses are visualized in fiction, especially in language reminiscent of the ultrasound examination, such fiction can perpetuate similar acts of rhetorical occlusion by assigning affective empathy to the fetus in isolation. *Surfacing*, in contrast, makes extensive use of visual imagery in its depictions of pregnancy, and works with the rhetorical separation it produces, but attaches no empathy to the fetus through such imagery. The novel's invocations of ultrasound technology emphasize its scientific qualities to the exclusion of its participation in antiabortion cultural discourse.[47]

One of the earliest scenes in *Surfacing* to mention pregnancy explicitly occurs when the protagonist casually notes that she recognizes the dock at her father's house as "the same dock my brother fell off the time he drowned" (28). She goes on to tell the story of how, while a toddler, her brother had figured out how to open the gate keeping him in an outdoor "chicken-wire enclosure," fallen off the dock, and been discovered in the water and saved by their mother.

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[47] Indeed, since Petchesky argues that "[f]etal imagery epitomizes the distortion inherent in all photographic images: their tendency to slice up reality into tiny bits wrenched out of real space and time," literary representations of pregnancy would seem to have a potential political advantage over visual representations (268).

Narrating the scene as an absent observer, close to her mother's perspective but with no access to what she feels or thinks, the protagonist describes, "She ran to the dock, he wasn't there, she went out to the end of it and looked down. My brother was under the water, face upturned, eyes open and unconscious, sinking gently; air was coming out of his mouth" (28). Moving back to her own perspective, the protagonist then explains, "It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (28). The most obviously striking thing about this scene is the very idea that a fetus can see outside its mother by looking through its mother's abdomen; the second point to highlight is the parallel drawn between the images of the protagonist within her mother's uterus and the brother in the water, both contained in fluid, with their eyes open, compared to animals (the protagonist is once again a "frog in a jar"—and not, as we might expect, a tadpole—and her brother having recently escaped from a "cage" made of chicken-wire).

The notion that the fetus can see the world outside the uterus, is an idea that, if not literally believed, is frequently played with in popular representations of fetuses, as accessed through the visual technology of the ultrasound. The ultrasound image also has the effect of making the fetus not only the object of study, but also a subject, our gaze implying a gaze back in response (Adams *Reproducing* 126, 143). That both the brother and the protagonist in her fetus-observer state have open eyes necessitates the question: how far are we meant to carry the comparison? The brother is described "eyes open and unconscious," so what is the state of the protagonist's consciousness? Are we to assume she is similarly open-eyed and unconscious, or are we to attribute some consciousness to the fetus because the protagonist has breathed life into

her by making her the observer of this scene? How powerful is the protagonist's backward-through-time gaze? Does her "memory" imbue her prenatal self with consciousness? These questions remain unanswerable partly because although the protagonist imbues her fetal self with the ability to see, she does not portray the fetus in particularly romantic or humanizing terms. Here the ability to visualize a fetus, even when it rhetorically bestows on that fetus the ability to look back, does not make the fetus a person so much as a laboratory animal.

This question of consciousness is complicated further as the story continues: as she searches for her father, the protagonist assumes that he is either dead or missing because he has gone mad. Both possibilities should make him inaccessible, but the protagonist believes she can transcend these obstacles to reach her father's consciousness, either through the power of her memories of him, or later, through her spiritual quest. After she receives word that her father's body has been recovered, the protagonist thinks that her companions are "avoiding me, they find me inappropriate; they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (160). Although this statement is ostensibly about her father, the tangle she creates, blurring life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, applies equally well to her aborted fetus as she comes to understand it: dead, and also alive, and also waiting to become alive. The protagonist's habit of assuming she knows what her father would think and do, to the point of feeling that she communicates with him, demonstrates her easy affective empathy with these varying states of life and consciousness achieved through her projection onto an absent figure—and how untrustworthy, even mentally unstable, she seems when she engages in these practices.

In the moment when the protagonist recovers her repressed memories of the abortion, she attributes a similar state of ontological limbo to the fetus. While diving in the lake, the protagonist sees something that terrifies her: “It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead” (143). At first she interprets what she has seen as her brother, an “image I’d kept from before I was born” but then “I recognized it: it wasn’t my brother I’d been remembering, that had been a disguise” (144). The states of consciousness of her father, her brother, and her fetus are all conflated: one is missing and presumed dead or insane, one “drowned” but did not die, and one is “a dead thing” that may never have been properly “alive” to begin with. As the protagonist remembers the abortion she describes the fetus, “in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn’t let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air,” but then decides, “[t]hat was wrong, I never saw it,” speculating that by the time she woke up after the procedure it was on its way “back to the sea” (144)—the phrase implying both life (the fetus as a water-dwelling creature) and death (the fetus as waste to be flushed).

The brother drowning, the protagonist as a fetus observing through her mother’s abdomen, the thing in the lake, and the aborted fetus: all are described as or associated with objects of scientific experiments, being looked at through the walls of their jars and looking back in return. The object of the scientific gaze is imbued with assumed or projected subjectivity by that gaze. In this sense the interplay between the fetus and its technology-assisted observer is somewhat similar to the interplay created by the filmic gaze: a relationship of projected affective empathy and a false sense of reciprocity especially underscored when an actor looks into a

camera and addresses her audience. *Surfacing*'s inclusion of other visual mediations, especially video recorders and mirrors, fleshes out the novel's exploration of the damaging effects of visualizing pregnancy. A crucial part of the protagonist's quest involves deconstructing and then reappropriating visuality in a way that does not sever pregnant women from fetuses.

The protagonist spends the final section of the book on a spiritual quest, incrementally shedding the trappings of civilization by discarding her clothing, destroying her work and everything manmade in and around the cabin, and eventually refusing to go indoors or eat anything from the garden. These efforts to return to an animalistic state seem necessary to the protagonist as ritual purifications and sacrifices that will allow her to reach her parents' spirits, and it is this quest that is usually emphasized in synopses of the novel as the climax and conclusion of the book. But this goal coincides with the protagonist's simultaneous project to become pregnant again, a more significant goal in many ways, since it is framed by the protagonist as a necessary step for attaining forgiveness from her previous, aborted fetus as well as an attempt to become whole again, repairing the psychic damage begun by the abortion itself and intensified by her experience in the lake.

After seeing the thing in the lake, the protagonist is approached by Joe, who forcibly tries to have sex with her and is only deterred by the protagonist warning him that she will become pregnant—but that night, the protagonist approaches Joe and initiates sex, having decided that she needs to become pregnant. She describes the moment of his orgasm, saying, "He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds" (165). Although she thinks of her new

pregnancy as resurrecting her previously aborted fetus and thereby atoning for past sins, the protagonist also reclaims her own bodily autonomy and agency by being the one who chooses and initiates the pregnancy.

Furthermore, the potential new fetus functions as a lost part of the protagonist herself, a piece of herself she had cut off that needs to be reintegrated. Several critics of this novel have read the abortion/pregnancy plot as one component of the protagonist's larger quest to fully integrate the various parts of herself.[48] The fetuses in this novel do represent a piece of the protagonist's psyche she has lost, but they are also more than that. Through her presumed pregnancy, the protagonist is able to work through the philosophical question of individuation within pregnancy, the problem that caused her to split off part of her psyche to begin with. As Tess Cosslett argues, pregnancy can spur a radical change in how someone understands her subjectivity, experiencing birth in particular as a "splitting apart" of mind and body or a "flowing process" of body-mind harmony depending on the cultural narratives she applies, and Mary Ruth Marotte reads a number of American pregnancy stories as captivity narratives "in which the pregnant woman can realize, perhaps even find power in, a challenging and disturbing loss of subjectivity" (Cosslett 117, Marotte 1). The result of pregnancy for some women is a fragmented sense of self, for others an expanded one, and for still others something else entirely; Alice E. Adams describes narratives of birth as "suggest[ing] diverse elaborations on basic themes of alienation, identification, and the construction of subjectivity through contradiction" (*Reproducing* 11). The protagonist of *Surfacing* experiences this shift in subjectivity as she faces the dilemma of discerning where she ends and the other begins, and she

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[48] See for example Tess Cosslett, Sherrill Grace, Catherine McLay, and John Moss.

works through a redefinition of her personhood that accommodates her radical everyday acts of female embodiment. Philip Kokotailo reads *Surfacing* as a formal and thematic synthesis of modernist and postmodernist conventions in which the protagonist neither finds her authentic self (in a modernist rite of passage story), nor fails to find herself (in a postmodern rejection of that narrative). Extending the implications of reading this novel this way, I argue that the protagonist discovers that her true self is fragmented, relational, and permeable but still whole.

Prior to this point in the story, the protagonist has frequently described herself as amputated (39, 45, 145), missing a sense (106, 138), "cut in two… sawn apart [as in a magic trick]… detached" (109), and the text includes frequent references to "stunted" children (9), "mutants" (54), and the "crippled and deformed" (76). After her moment of revelation, the protagonist begins to regain a sense of completeness: in the first moments after seeing the thing in the lake she thinks "I wanted to be whole," (147) and as her quest continues she increasingly rejects borders, thinking about her parents, "Now I understand the rule. They can't be anywhere that's marked out, enclosed: even if I open the doors and fences they could not pass in, to houses and cages, they can move only in the spaces between them, they are against borders. To talk with them I must approach the condition they themselves have entered" (186). The protagonist must become similarly against borders, similarly existing in in-between, liminal spaces. After she decides she is pregnant again, she thinks of the fetus as both distinct from and an inseparable part of herself, often at the same time: "My body also changes," she thinks, "the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (172). "The creature in me," and "I ferry it" suggest that the fetus is a distinct passenger within the protagonist's body, but "My body also changes," "I multiply" and the

"filaments" it sends out within her emphasize pregnancy as a transformation and expansion of the protagonist herself. The new pregnancy is a replacement for the one she terminated, assuaging her guilt over letting herself be pushed into the abortion by her partner, but also allowing her to reclaim a sense of control and power over her own body and a new understanding of her subjectivity as both whole and permeable.

The protagonist's meditations on wholeness and individuation are tied to the recurring presence of vision and visual technology in her experiences of her gender. Throughout the book, Joe and David have been recording footage for a film. The men's dominance and sexism is especially apparent in the scenes in which they record their surroundings: they film a tree they have chopped down, fish they have caught, and a disturbing scene in which David forces Anna to strip. David also suggests that Joe and the protagonist should let him record them having sex, to which Anna adds the suggestion that she could film the scene so both of the men could have sex with the protagonist—perhaps the only thing that deescalates this menacing moment is the men's previous insistence that only they are qualified to use the camera (169). During her spiritual quest, just before she flees from her companions by canoe and hides until they leave the island, the protagonist destroys the camera and unspools the men's film, dumping it into the water and thinking, "the invisible captured images are swimming away into the lake like tadpoles… hundred of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled and shelved" (170).

Later, when she returns to the cabin alone, the protagonist further rejects visuality: "I must stop being in the mirror," she thinks. "I look for the last time at my distorted glass face… reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me… that and not the camera is what I should

have broken" (181). Guided by her own internal logic, the protagonist feels that vision, especially when it is mediated and enhanced, is a force that separates, distorts, and traps, a force that seems to facilitate empathy but really shows only a projection of the viewer's desires. The mirror, like the ultrasound, positions the protagonist as outside observer of her own body rather than actor living within and through it. Her rejection of the camera and the mirror, and her liberation of her own image and Anna's, are necessary steps on her journey toward wholeness, the freely swimming tadpoles reversing the prior recurring metaphor of the frog in the jar.

While *Surfacing* points to the separating, isolating functions of visuality, the protagonist also reappropriates the visual in these final scenes of the book. In her search for clues left by her parents, the protagonist discovers a drawing she made as a child of a pregnant woman, "a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out" (159). The protagonist's drawing performs the task of the ultrasound, allowing observers to see into the pregnant woman's body and creating the illusion that the fetus can gaze back in return, but this drawing, unlike most popular representations and appropriations of ultrasound imagery, keeps the fetus situated within the woman's body, both of them represented in the picture.[49] As an adult, the protagonist returns to this more holistic picture of pregnancy as an important talisman on her journey. She also invokes the power of visual technology at the height of her mystical state when she thinks, "I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh," but again, her own body—bones and webs of flesh—stays in the picture with the fetus, now somewhat humanized by its designation as a child (187). It is only after this point that the protagonist returns to the mirror and is happy enough with her

[49] Fetal ultrasound examinations were likely not widely used during pregnancy when the protagonist would have been a child, so it's possible to claim that because she had not yet been exposed to images of free-floating fetuses, she visually represented pregnancy in a less mediated way and included all participants in the picture.

relationship to it to describe herself ironically as “a new kind of centerfold,” a gesture that allows cameras back into her world as well (196).

Furthermore, as she works toward an understanding of her subjectivity that allows for permeability, the protagonist suggests that to be complete is not to be closed. Just after Anna has suggested that the protagonist should have sex with Joe and David on camera, and just before the protagonist dumps the film into the lake, she watches Anna apply her makeup, thinking,

> Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone’s head. She is locked in, she isn’t allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. (169)

From the perspective of liberal humanism and the Western legal systems based on it, one of the things that is truly problematic about the female body is that it is permeable. Not only is the pregnant woman complete but separable and one becoming two, it is also both self-contained and disturbingly open.[50] As *Surfacing* continues, the protagonist becomes aware of her society’s denial of full discursive and legal personhood to women, demonstrated to her through the problem of pregnancy: when “nothing goes in, nothing comes out” women are simulacra trapped “in someone’s head”—they are abstractions denied real bodies. P. Lealle Ruhl argues that within liberalism, abstraction from bodies grants women “the status of ‘honorary men,’ but pregnancy

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[50] See Elizabeth Grosz and P. Lealle Ruhl for more on this point.

interrupts this honorific status" (44). When something does go in or come out, women are seen only as their bodies and fail to be enough like men to be granted the same level of humanity.

Nevertheless, by the end of her spiritual journey, the protagonist thinks, "Through the ground, break surface, I'm standing now; separate again" (188), suggesting that while she has traveled through states of radical connectedness (identifying as an animal, then a plant, and then simply a place [187]), she has reemerged as her own separate and separable human being from whom pregnancy and abortion have not stolen, amputated, or closed off anything. When she feels that "[t]he rules are over," she thinks "I am the only one left alive on the island" (194)—and this "only one" includes the protagonist's potential pregnancy. In the end, the protagonist's seeming solution to the problem of the "bifurcated view of the pregnant woman" in which "she is clearly one but also clearly (or at least potentially) two" (Ruhl 38) is to embrace the paradox by integrating twoness into her understanding of her own whole but permeable self. The fetus is something that begins as part of the pregnant person and eventually differentiates into its own living thing, but a pregnancy includes and produces more than the fetus. During pregnancy a woman also grows a placenta, an ad hoc organ that has no function or life outside the woman's body. Pregnancy names the experience of a person growing another person but also producing milk, different hormones, and extra blood, and undergoing changes in her vascular system, immune system, muscles, ligaments, bones, hair, and skin. Some of these changes outlast the gestation of the fetus; they can occur in "hysterical" pregnancies; and they must be managed after miscarriage or abortion. We can position all of these changes as happening *for* the fetus, of course, but they happen *to* the pregnant person, who expands enough during pregnancy to encompass two beings within her one whole but permeable self.

The fetus in *Surfacing* is a blank upon which to be projected, then, but the novel challenges both the process and the outcomes of such projection. The use of visuality to gaze upon the fetus constitutes a damaging intrusion, a wedge forced between pregnant woman and fetus that results in trauma and loss of personhood for the woman. The protagonist, acting as a stand-in for the reader and showing us what is possible in narratives about pregnancy, turns visuality to her own ends, however, by resituating herself as part of the picture. In the final moments of the novel, as she watches Joe and considers returning with him to civilization, the protagonist also suspends narrative time and insists that she is only whole while in a state of one-becoming-two. Her indecision at the close of the novel rejects impermeable models of subjectivity as well as narrative closure. Through that rejection, the protagonist forces readers to accept the liminality of the pregnant body.

Simply hearing the plot of *Surfacing*, it would be easy to mistake it for an antiabortion novel: the protagonist's abortion is traumatic, and what she requires to heal from the experience is another pregnancy. Atwood deftly subverts this narrative, however, by making the cause of protagonist's trauma less the abortion itself than the theft of her full personhood it represents.[51] Seen in this light, it does not matter if the protagonist is actually pregnant at the end of the novel. What is important is that she has reintegrated a part of herself previously severed by the abortion and expanded her sense of self to accommodate openness. Visual technology, far from creating affective empathy for the fetus by separating it from the woman, is shown to separate the woman from herself. If the ultrasound's sterile, scientific gaze renders pregnant bodies nothing more than "jars," the fetuses that occupy those jars become mere "frogs."

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[51] Carol P. Christ argues that readers should not "dismiss Atwood's vision as antifeminist," and cites a letter in which Atwood states she would be "most upset if my book were to be construed as an anti-abortion tract" (328-9).

The Time-Traveling Fetus: *The Salt Roads*

Neither *Rosemary's Baby* nor *Surfacing* presents a pregnancy story in which the fetus is a fully developed character. As a result, these novels' fetuses remain rhetorical blanks of the type seen in visual ultrasound imagery, ripe for projection. Both of these books subvert such projective relationships, however, by making the affective empathy that might accompany such projection unthinkable. In the process, they speak back to potentially problematic tropes of the pregnancy narrative, namely its demand for investigation and consequent invasions of privacy, and its visualization of pregnancy borrowing from medical/scientific discourse. Yet, in neither of these texts are readers presented with a fetus who appears as a fleshed out character in its own right, and the question remains whether such a project can be executed in a way that does not call for affective empathy with a fetal character at the expense of a pregnant character.[52] Is it possible to tell such a story without the personhood such a move would grant to the fetus impinging on the personhood of the pregnant character? Nalo Hopkinson's 2003 novel *The Salt Roads* succeeds in doing exactly that. This novel is able to accomplish such a feat partly by deconstructing the temporality of pregnancy, both narratively and biologically.

The Salt Roads is an expansive, hybrid novel that weaves together the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction as it traverses the lives of four protagonists. Its overarching story is that of a Ginen goddess (called Lasirén or Ezili) being "born" and coming to awareness

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[52] Among the texts that do attach empathy to fetal characters at the expense of pregnant ones is Thomas Keneally's *Passenger* (1979), narrated by a fetus who experiences the world by borrowing his mother's senses, and who observes helplessly—like the reader—as his mother is left by his father, is committed to a psychiatric hospital, and is rescued by another man who sees her as a mother figure for himself. Here the novel sacrifices the pregnant woman in that readers interpret everything that happens to her in terms of the effect it has on her fetus. At perhaps the extreme end of denying affective empathy for a pregnant woman in favor of her fetus is Adam Pepper's *Super Fetus* (2009). The book jacket description of this "cult horror" novel proclaims, "He's a fetus growing in the womb of a whiny white trash whore of a mother. His problem: she wants to have him aborted. But what this bitch doesn't know is that she isn't pregnant with some mild-mannered developing human form. Heck no. This is Super Fetus."

of herself. She does so as she travels through the lives and consciousnesses of the other three main characters: Thais, a prostitute living in ancient Alexandria; Mer, a midwife and healer in mid-eighteenth century Saint-Domingue; and Jeanne Duval, a stage performer in mid-nineteenth century Paris and mistress to Charles Baudelaire. One of the most significant and radical aspects of this novel is the characterization of Ezili: she is a goddess, but she is also a spiritual fetus. As a *lwa*, Ezili at times describes her relationship with the human women as one of being trapped inside their heads or "soul case[s]," as riding the women as if on horseback, or as being "passenger" to their "host" (46, 132, 232, 122).[53] But far more often, the language used to express Ezili's relationships to Mer, Jeanne, and Thais involves nurturing and protective metaphors of conception, gestation, birth, and babyhood. Ezili's origin scene is called a "watery, salty birth in drowning water," she describes her "dim newborn eyes," and she becomes frustrated with feeling like "a lurching toddler whose mother has tight hold of its hand" (153, 56, 193). Ezili's conception, development, and birth structure the narrative, and she is supernaturally and communally gestated by each of the human women in turn.

Although Ezili's gestation within the other characters makes a pregnancy the structuring umbrella under which all events of the novel fall, it also subverts the supposed biological teleology of pregnancy. It is important to deconstruct this teleology because left unchallenged, it facilitates the rhetorical collapse of the end of pregnancy into its beginning that makes "fertilized egg" discursively synonymous with "baby." Instead, in *The Salt Roads*, the assumed automatic progression from sex to pregnancy to birth to motherhood is disrupted at every step. Although she does not become a mother, Thais is nonetheless radically transformed by a pregnancy that

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[53] Lwas are minor, intermediary deity figures drawn from Haitian Vodoun. Hopkinson defines them as "immortal beings to whom God has assigned specific portfolios" (Due 401).

ends in miscarriage. Mer too is intimately connected with pregnancy and birth without herself raising a child: she works as a midwife, and her past pregnancy ended with a stillbirth. Jeanne, in contrast, never becomes pregnant but does becomes a mother when she raises her lover's daughter.

These interventions into the teleology of pregnancy also point to the ways *The Salt Roads* repurposes moments of reproductive failure, making them successful in subversive ways. What should be Ezili's "conception," her origin scene, is instead described as a birth—she is born *into* the other protagonists rather than out of them—and this birth is facilitated by reproductive failure. Early in the novel, Mer and her partner, Tipingee, assist another slave, Georgine, as she gives birth to a stillborn baby. After the delivery, Georgine, Mer, and Tipingee take the baby to a nearby river to bury it. While Tipingee digs the grave, she sings a song from Haitian folklore about flying away to freedom; simultaneously Georgine calls upon her mother, whose previous drowning has provided the location for the baby's grave, and Mer prays to the goddess Lasirèn to "take this child" (36). Through their songs and prayers, the three women collectively bring into consciousness the goddess Mer invokes, named Ezili or Lasirèn. In Ezili's first section of the novel, she thinks that she has been born from "mourning and sorrow and three women's tearful voices," noting that "a small life, never begun, lends me its unused vitality" (40). The otherworldly power of the stillborn baby—and the close proximity of the rituals of childbirth and funeral—are the keys to effecting Ezili's supernatural birth out of failure. At the close of Ezili's journey, what should be her "birth" scene (her final separation from her mothers' bodies) is instead a miscarriage. Thais physically experiences a miscarriage, and at that moment Ezili is thrown out of her head: "I tear loose from Thais, as the little dot of cells tears away from her too.

I'm tumbling, no control" (303). As much as she has wanted freedom, Ezili is afraid that she isn't ready: "That would have been a child, that thing growing in Thais. As I am a child in this spirit world. I don't learn fast enough. It didn't learn fast enough how to stick in Thais's belly" (303). Ezili may not learn fast enough, but after she is expelled from Thais she meets her other goddess selves and completes her journey; this miscarriage is not a failure but a success.

Thais also eventually experiences this reproductive failure positively, as it launches her on a mystical journey. She renames herself Meri around the time of her miscarriage, and comes to realize she can hear everything, from her own internal bodily functions, to animals miles away, to rocks breathing (381). The cacophony causes her to go for extended periods without food or drink, so as not to be distracted from meditation by the sounds of her own digestion. As a result of her fasting, eventually Meri is so light she can levitate (388). After she has learned to listen to the desert so intently that she can hear Ezili speak to her, Meri arrives at the knowledge that "The child wasn't built well, couldn't live, so its spirit went back between the worlds. There will be other children in the world. Not my fault! My soul leapt with joy. … I knew it now. I had done no wrong. My name is Meritet, and I had been pregnant, and I was no longer. I could think that now, and be at peace with it" (387). For the other human protagonist, Jeanne, even the lesser amount of reproductive potential released from the completely mundane event of menstruation allows her to access temporary abilities of clairvoyance. In all three of the women's stories reproductive failure is repurposed, its energies channelled elsewhere and its associations (growth, progression, fruition) twisted just as its temporality is.

Such repurposing of reproductive failure can be read as queer: as Judith Halberstam argues, "Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well"; Halberstam

goes on to explore the style and rewards of queer failure (3). Queer failure is further linked to *queer temporalities*, which mount still more challenges to conventional uses of the pregnancy narrative, especially through their criticisms of *reproductive futurism* (a fetishization of certain visions of the future through the figure of the child) and their embrace of non-linear "affective relations across time" (Dinshaw 142).[54] The lives of these protagonists not only connect affectively across time and reject reproductive futurism, they also exist outside the templates and strictures of *chrononormativity*, a term Elizabeth Freeman uses to describe ideological processes and pressures that reify institutional time, managing entire peoples by regimenting labor, home and family life, and sanctioning proper relationships to the past and future (3-6).[55] Freeman's analysis resonates with Saidiya Hartman's arguments in *Lose Your Mother* (2008) about how chrononormativity impacts enslaved bodies as well as queer ones. By being made to forget the past, slaves are denied seemingly normal relationships to time through processes and cycles of family life; the events of slaves' family and bodily lives (births, marriages, deaths) are simultaneously subsumed within categories of work and labor. During Georgine's labor, Mer thinks about how she "must help starving women squatting in sugar cane whose children were fighting their way free of their wombs. Afterwards, I strapped their children to their backs and if they were lucky, they got a day's rest in the slave hospital before they had to get their black

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[54] See Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) and Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999) for these specific references; see also Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* (1972) and Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2009) as well as Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) for more on queer temporalities.

[55] In dominant, institutional conceptions of time, the present is seen as correcting the past's wrongs, healing the past's wounds, and fulfilling the past's promises and hopes. The figure of "the queer" is seen in this light both as a historical production of certain times, and as a figure for the past itself, because queer bodies are seen to exist outside of chrononormative sequences of courtship, love, marriage, and reproduction; because they are associated with anality and orality rather than genital sexuality and are therefore coded backward, regressive, or immature; and because a certain "stubborn lingering of pastness… is a hallmark of queer affect" (Freeman 8).

behinds back to work" (6). These details contextualize pregnancy and childbirth within slaves' lives: reproduction is a form of production, childbirth one more form of labor. Along with the other repurposed reproductive failures of the novel, Georgine's stillbirth subverts the strictures of chrononormativity by facilitating Ezili's birth outside the reach of those strictures.

Whereas literature structured around pregnancy typically borrows from and reinforces its linearity, the texts of this chapter each recognize the possibilities for pregnant characters' power and personhood afforded by dwelling in moments of uncertainty and stopped time. Any remaining scrap of Rosemary's agency vanishes the moment she sees her baby, suggesting that, ironically, she was better off during her horrific pregnancy than after it. The protagonist of *Surfacing* must embrace liminality in her spiritual quest, and even after it is over she ends the novel frozen in a moment of indecision, possibly pregnant but possibly not, and weighing her options regarding her relationships with Joe and the world he represents. Certainly Maggie is hoping for some temporal flexibility as she seeks to make her lie true retroactively. Despite her protests that she wishes to swim free from her human mothers, Ezili carves out a great deal of power the same way Rosemary, Maggie, and the protagonist of *Surfacing* do: by dwelling inside the liminality of pregnancy. These protagonists all point to the middles of stories as open spaces that can be endlessly expanded, and they ask readers to play along with them as they tell the thousand and one stories that prolong their suspended moments of power. Most of these longings for temporal manipulation ultimately concede to the physical realities of pregnancy and proceed with their stories, though. Through its blend of non-realist genres, *The Salt Roads* can go even further in rejecting the teleology of the conventional pregnancy story. This novel puts a range of

temporal modes in conversation with the pregnancy story, as Ezili time travels across the other women's lives while simultaneously developing in a predictable progression, like a human fetus.

The elements of Thais's, Mer's, and Jeanne's stories fit together like puzzle pieces, making of the three one composite maternal trinity, even as their narratives are structured according to three different models: Jeanne's trajectory is linear, Mer's is cyclical, and Thais's is a helix in which she comes full circle but is also fundamentally transformed. This blend of various temporalities is reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's concept of "women's time" as *cyclical* and *monumental* (which subsumes both linear and cyclical time), and *The Salt Roads* also shows ways that its female characters can move among these temporalities and combine them to structure the narratives of their lives (Kristeva 194 cited in Adams *Reproducing* 82). Collectively, this blend of temporal models adds to the novel a variety of momentums, propelling the overall narrative forward but also backward and sideways. Ezili's story progresses predictably, but the end of her story occurs in the middle of Thais's, the earliest in objective time. Meanwhile, much of the middle of Ezili's story, in which very little happens to her, is linked to Jeanne's life, the human story that progresses the most linearly. And Mer's story, structured cyclically and occurring in the chronological middle of the book, contains both Ezili's origin scene and a flash-forward to her life after the events of the novel. If this description sounds overly complicated, that seems to be the point: this pregnancy story, even beginning with a "conception" and ending with a "birth," can in no way be described as linear.

In addition to the different temporal structures operating together in *The Salt Roads*, Ezili also embodies a time paradox, since she preexists herself. This paradox can be said to be true of any deity, but *The Salt Roads* uses this seeming impossibility to also make its mother-daughter

relationships paradoxical. One night Mer has a mystical vision of Ezili coming out of the water in the form of an enormous mermaid, and she "stretches [her] arms to [her] water mother" (64). Mer thinks, "I'm a big woman, but like any child, I cried for my mother to pull me into her arms, to rock me on the swell of her breast" (64). In this scene, Ezili is also a double of Mer herself—when Mer first sees her under the water she mistakes her for her reflection—and is at times described in childlike terms: younger than Mer, impatient and stubborn, and needing her help (64). At the end of the scene Mer finds a small piece of sea glass in the shape of a whale and treasures it as Ezili's gift and token. A short time later, Mer eats a piece of the placenta she had saved from Georgine's delivery while praying and "rocking" the glass whale "between [her] breasts" (101). This image, of a middle-aged midwife rocking a symbol of her younger mother while consuming a remnant of the reproductive failure that facilitated that mother's birth, suggests the tangled relationships of mother and daughter that run through the whole novel. Woven together with the linearity of Ezili's fetal development, *The Salt Roads* creates a paradoxical time loop by also making Ezili and Mer each other's mothers, and radically revises the structure of the pregnancy narrative in the process.

Related to the paradoxes of her existence and relationships, Ezili is also part of a fractal pattern. Hopkinson explains in an interview with Tananarive Due:

> Afro-Caribbean lwas have many different iterations of themselves, some "bigger" and better known than others. *The Salt Roads* is about three aspects of Ezili… . But as Ezili discovers herselves, she realizes that she is everywhere, in small versions and large, and that each of her selves echoes the others and is connected to them. It's an organic fractal image; the pattern (seed) repeated in different scales, each joined to the other. That's why

> Ezili's first perception is of the "plaited seedscale song of sorrow," the triple prayer that brings her into being. (401)

As Hopkinson suggests, fractals are repeating patterns, appearing in nature and in mathematics, that appear the same at every scale. Invoking a geometric concept to describe the novel's characters—and explicitly tying that concept to the novel's nonlinear temporalities—furthers *The Salt Roads*'s overall project of deconstructing linearity, here by spacializing time. Scott Bukatman, in his reading of *Blade Runner* (1982), argues that the film presents its city setting as "a fractal environment," available to the viewer in the same amount of detail at every scale (134). The "transgression of scalar perspective" made possible by the setting's fractal nature is showcased in one scene in particular, in which a character inserts a photograph into a computer and enables the viewer to penetrate the image with him, impossibly enhancing details as we zoom in (135-6). Bukatman argues that in this scene, as character and viewer systematically search the image for clues, "the space of the photograph is transmuted into the temporal domain of narrative/cinema" (136). This kind of equivalence of time and space operates in reverse in *The Salt Roads*, in which the narrative time of the novel is transmuted into the spacial domain of a visual image. Fredric Jameson connects postmodern spacialization with depthlessness, "a whole new culture of the image," and "a consequent weakening of historicity" by which the past becomes meaningful to the present primarily as a set of fragments available for nostalgia, pastiche, and cannibalism (*Postmodernism* 58). In *The Salt Roads*, such a postmodern flattening of time into space is not such a bad thing—in fact, the novel's engagement with history is enriched when "Ezili inhabits the universe the way a fish might inhabit a globe filled with

water”—or, I would add, the way a fetus inhabits a womb—“swim[ming] to any point in time and space” (Hopkinson 401).

One final way this novel challenges the temporality of the pregnancy story derives from its engagement with the past, as historical fiction that not only borrows from historical narratives but explicitly revises them as well. Perhaps *The Salt Roads*’s most radical subversion of the pregnancy narrative comes through this foregrounding of *revision* itself. Each of the three human storylines features at least one character based on a historical figure, and Ezili acts as an editor of these people’s lives, rewriting them from within.

Thais’s story is the one that makes the revisionary project of the book clearest. This character, also called Pearl and Meritet or Meri, is an Egyptian girl sold into sexual slavery in Greece. She travels to Jerusalem to see the new temple to the Virgin Mary, becoming increasingly ill during the voyage and discovering she is pregnant only when she miscarries inside the church, “defiling [the] holy space,” according to a nun who witnesses the scene, with her blood and her cries for “pagan gods” (301, 300). After she physically recovers, Meri walks into the wilderness and spends several months fasting and meditating. Finally she calls out to a passing priest who joins her and half-listens as she tells her story; he re-interprets what he hears through a Christian lens. He embellishes or even fabricates details that support his understanding of her life, transforming her story into the myth of St. Mary of Egypt. Despite the priest’s misinterpretation of Meri’s actions, the text is quite clear about her story from her own perspective. While he assumes she was a prostitute to satisfy her insatiable lust, readers know she was sold into the profession by her parents. While he thinks she could not enter the church until she heard the voice of the Virgin Mary and repented, readers know that she collapsed after

entering the church, and that the voice she heard was that of the nun who tended to her. And while he knows nothing of her miscarriage, readers know that it is the event that triggers Meri's journey into the desert, and that coming to feel a sense of peace about the experience is what allows Meri to leave the desert once again, spiritually renewed.

Her miscarriage doesn't only revise Meri as a character, however. The incident as it is written is also a revision of the myth of St. Mary of Egypt—a revision that claims to be a more authentic truth, making the received story the unreliable revision. The novel also includes a "traditional" version of the myth of St. Mary of Egypt interspersed with Meri's "real" story, implicitly asking readers to compare the two narratives and see how certain details could have become twisted with retelling. In her interview with Due, Hopkinson says of St. Mary of Egypt, "Nobody becomes a prostitute because they love sex," so she changed her circumstances to more realistic ones (405). Hopkinson also explains that although she was fascinated by this saint's story, her descriptions as "dusky," and her role as patron of prostitutes and sailors, "I had no patience with demonizing Mary's life. So I tried to imagine a version of her story that would humanize her instead" (406). Hopkinson humanizes Meri by impregnating her, spiritually as well as physically. In all three of the human stories, historical figures are animated and humanized by Ezili's presence—her supernatural gestation provides the affective touch across time that allows access to these figures' inner lives. In all cases, *The Salt Roads* attaches affective empathy to pregnant characters *through* the fetal character, never asking readers to choose one over another.

All of the prior texts of this chapter make a pregnant or possibly pregnant woman's life central to the narrative, and ask readers to attach affective empathy to her, feeling some combination of sympathy, compassion, and identification regarding the pregnant character.

Rosemary's Baby and *Surfacing* make this bid for affective empathy fairly unproblematically, by working to subvert any affective empathy readers might be inclined to attach to their fetal characters instead. *The Salt Roads*, on the other hand, does ask readers to identify and empathize with a fetal character, but crucially, never at the expense of her mothers. It does so partially by including sections narrated by each of the four main characters and privileging none above any of the others.[56] It also cultivates affective empathy for each of the protagonists through the others, including Ezili. Because of the ways their lives affect each other's, empathy for one protagonist is empathy for all.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that apparently some readers have found *The Salt Roads* alienating or exclusionary, a text that fails to elicit any affective empathy for its characters. In their interview, Due asks Hopkinson, "Some white reviewers have written that they don't believe this novel was addressed to them. To what do you attribute this response? To what degree do you write with a specific readership in mind?" (401). Although Due points specifically to the races of the characters and reviewers as a point of empathetic disconnect, Hopkinson amends the statement to "white, *male* reviewers" (401, emphasis added). She then addresses what might be alienating about her writing, including the fact that the story "is largely told through the voices of women" (402). Discomfort or alienation on the part of "white, male reviewers" might be generated not only by the explicitness of the text's depictions of female sexuality and reproduction, but also by the voice of the fetal goddess, narrating her own story from inside a cosmic pregnancy, or by the unusual literary move of requesting affective empathy with all of

[56] Ezili's sections frequently take the form of poetic or stream-of-consciousness interludes between the other protagonists' narratives, lending them structural importance, but because they are much shorter, and readers require the other sections to "decode" them, they cannot be considered the primary sections of the novel. The three human women's stories also take up different proportions of the novel in terms of their lengths, but Hopkinson's description of the women's lives as part of a larger fractal pattern suggests that however "big" or "small" each story is, they are all integral parts and reflections of each other.

these (black, female) protagonists rather than asking readers to make a choice among them. *The Salt Roads* uses pregnancy as a storytelling analogy and structuring device, but it speaks back to and amends the linearity of that device, refusing to sacrifice women in the process. Hopkinson uses her deity character to make the mother-daughter relationship a time paradox, as well: the women of *The Salt Roads* are all bound to each other in intimate, mothering relationships, and their identities as mothers and daughters reverberate through time in all directions. The empathy readers extend to Ezili, the fetal character, does not exclude empathy for her mothers—it amplifies it.

Narrative Politics

As these pregnancy texts demonstrate, rhetorical and literary devices that cultivate affective empathy for fetuses can be deconstructed and even repurposed by literature that speaks back to those devices' typical politics. Within the context of fiction, invading the privacy of a pregnancy can be something a narrator and/or readers do on the pregnant character's behalf, and with awareness of its discomforts. The scientific gaze upon a pregnancy can be made cold, even grotesque, rather than sentimental. And the temporality of pregnancy can be twisted and opened up rather than reified as a teleology. While I began this chapter by arguing that these tropes of the pregnancy story rhetorically separate fetuses from pregnant women and therefore bestow personhood upon fetuses, one possibility suggested by these texts' experiments is that they do not have to. As the example of *Surfacing* demonstrates, it is possible to invoke the visual imagery of fetal ultrasound examinations, including the rhetorical separation of a fetus from its maternal environment that visualization facilitates, while highlighting the inaccuracies and harm of such a

separation. In that novel, the pregnant woman does lose some of her discursive and psychological personhood through the use of that trope, but this loss is emphasized and reckoned with, and the fetus does not gain what she has lost. Furthermore, the example of *The Salt Roads* proves that even when affective empathy is assigned to a fetal character, such a move does not have to occur at the expense of empathy for pregnant characters. Antiabortion tactics relying on the process of creating such empathy for fetuses break down under such literary scrutiny, or at least require further explanation and support.

Analyzing these texts also confirms that readerly empathy and affective empathy (even the kind felt for fictional characters while reading) can properly be understood as two different phenomena. The processes of readerly empathy are basically the same across the three novels, assuming readers become entangled with these storyworlds, propel them onward by continuing to read, and make political and ethical determinations about the events they encounter and their own relationships to them, even if the felt experiences of those processes are different. The processes these novels use to cultivate affective empathy for their characters vary greatly, however. In *Rosemary's Baby*, it is safe to say that readers are only meant to empathize with Rosemary. She is the sole point of identification and sympathy within the text, as the only focalizer of the third person narration, the detective solving a mystery, and the victim of a conspiracy. In *Surfacing*, it is hard to say that the novel begins by calling for affective empathy with any of the characters, even the protagonist, who is emotionally stunted, and whose narration makes for a difficult entry point into her psyche. It is the recovery of her buried memory and the events that follow that humanize this character and begin to build the reader's empathetic connection to her, a twist that makes readers care about the aborted fetus primarily in terms of

what it cost the protagonist. In *The Salt Roads*, readers are called upon to attach affective empathy to all four of the protagonists, and many of the secondary characters as well: not only do the protagonists tell their own stories, they tell them in ways that reveal their motivations, struggles, feelings, and connections to other characters. The mechanisms of readerly empathy facilitate these various forms and processes of affective empathy, but the relationship between the two modes of empathy is far from identical or automatic.

These pregnancy novels do provide consistent insight into the politics of projection underlying affective empathy, however, even when such projection operates differently from novel to novel. In *Rosemary's Baby* and *Surfacing*, projection upon the rhetorical blank of the fetus isn't an option offered to readers, because forces within both books engage in such projection with negative consequences. The protagonist of *Surfacing* overwrites her pregnancy with memories shown to be false, and the way she conflates her aborted fetus, her prenatal self, her drowning brother, her absent father, and her potential new pregnancy is part of what marks her as mentally unstable—and the coven's projection of its agenda onto Rosemary's pregnancy is downright evil. But even in *The Salt Roads*, where the fetus is not a blank, and therefore projection upon it cannot operate in the same way, projection is still present and still fraught with potential dangers.

Rather than a rhetorical blank upon which to be projected, the fetus in *The Salt Roads* is the author of her own story, which she tells from "inside [the] nowhere place" that is her spiritual gestation (303). It is not a gaze inward that imbues her with a false subjectivity; in fact, in the moment that Ezili comes into consciousness she fills the women at the riverside with a sense of emptiness, reversing the use of blankness that appears in other pregnancy stories. Mer narrates,

“And then something took me. A big, empty knowledge swallowed me, bigger than the sea, and in more turmoil. My own self shrank to nothing inside it and for a while, I didn’t know myself, didn’t know, couldn’t understand” (37). Through the rest of the novel, Ezili continues to project herself into the women with whom she interacts, controlling their movements and making decisions on their behalf according to her wishes and interpretations of their lives.

The scene that most powerfully repurposes the act of projection is one in which Jeanne and her lover Lise decide to scry, attempting to see a vision of Lise’s true love. Not finding any water in their room, they instead use a chamber pot they have previously filled with urine and menstrual blood. Thinking that scrying reminds her of her “grandmaman’s juju, her African magic,” Jeanne remembers that her grandmother would slaughter chickens “on our back stoop, let the blood fall there. For the spirits to drink, she said. Fresh blood was life, she said. But she said the blood from a woman’s time was stale, not fresh. What had we just put in that pot, Lise and I?” (20). The women do see a vision in the pot: a black man they assume to be Lise’s future love. Lise is convinced of the accuracy of the vision, and deeply upset by the man’s race and seeming poverty (22).

By the end of the book readers have become used to the supernatural power of women’s reproductive functions, but have seen them twisted and queered at every turn, so it comes as no surprise that this vision is both true and misleading. The man in the vision, a rhetorical blank upon which the reading characters project their hopes and fears, turns out to be Jeanne’s true love, not Lise’s, and by the time she meets him she herself is desperately poor, and his modest but stable livelihood as a butcher is her salvation. Appearing as he does in a maternal environment of menstrual blood and urine, seen through a boundary that dissolves under the

women's gaze "as in a mirror," the man can be read a fetal character at that moment, and not only because his presence in Jeanne's life is inchoate at the time, but because the text describes him appearing in a "foetid pot" (21). This terminology implicitly connects this moment to the one other "foetid" environment of the novel, a "stagnant swamp" in which Ezili suddenly finds herself after unexpectedly and temporarily breaking free from Jeanne's consciousness. Ezili narrates,

> I move in another direction. Move in time that is no time, until I flop into another stagnant pool. Again I clamber out of it and go another way. This time I am beached, left gasping in a nameless, foetid horror of a place where there is no sustaining aether. There is nothing. It is undescribable [sic]. I twist and flap until I drop down into the mists again, gasping, thankful. What is wrong here? I do not know. I do not know how to understand. I swim slowly this time, thinking. (262)

Both of these scenes transform *fetal* into *foetid*, portraying moments of gestation that become warped and grotesque because they occur outside of and separate from maternal bodies. As with the novel's other reproductive failures that serve to queer the pregnancy narrative, scrying with women's bodily fluids, especially read in conjunction with this parallel passage, subverts and repurposes the act of projection onto a pregnancy, while emphasizing the importance of the pregnant body as both environment and actor. Any projection onto a fetal figure, these scenes suggest, must be recognized as a partial, distorted vision. If projection is a central mechanism of affective empathy, or an unsolvable problem at its core, these pregnancy texts suggest that maybe the best we can do is be vigilant about its inaccuracies, politics, and potential rhetorical harms.

The idea of attempting to see the whole picture (or at least being aware of the partiality of any given perspective) resonates with the conclusion of the previous chapter. Postcritical reading sanctions readerly relationships not premised on suspicion, exclusion, or diagnosis, and therefore supports a more holistic acknowledgment of the multiplicity of meaning within texts. So too is affective empathy that includes a healthy skepticism regarding its own mechanisms and effects (such as projection) more likely to extend in multiple directions at once, even when "empathy with all" seems impossible or paradoxical. This, after all, is one of the lessons of pregnancy's permeabilities: we are capable of holding seemingly contradictory truths in our very bodies.

An expansive philosophy of empathy extending in all directions is even more explicitly invoked in the texts of the next chapter. The shift from affective empathy to communicative empathy is not only a shift from empathy's most overtly political sense to its most explicitly science fictional use. It is also is a shift from a focus on the receiver/projector in a primarily unidirectional model of empathy to a focus on senders/transmitters in a multidirectional model of empathy, in which all actors are nodes in a vast communication network. That transition in models of empathy also reflects this project's movement from the sex and pregnancy of the first two chapters to the virality of the final chapter, since rather than examining permeabilities largely understood as occurring in one direction (inward or outward from the individual), I will now turn my attention to permeabilities occurring in all directions at once.

"A Psychic Epidemic": Communicative Empathy and Narrative Perspective in Post-45 Viral Literature

In his experimental novel *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), William Burroughs describes language as an alien virus. "The 'Other Half' is the word," he writes,

> The "Other Half" is an organism. Word is an organism. … the "Other Half" worked quite some years on a symbiotic basis. From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. … The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that *forces you to talk*." (49)

In *Ticket*, language is alive, inescapable, and infectious. As Jesse Miller explains, "For Burroughs, viruses are not merely communicated, they are figures for communication." The figure of the language virus functions metaphorically, but it also points to language as a physical force, instantiated in human physiology as well as material texts. Like sex and pregnancy, virality encompasses an embodied experience, and in post-45 viral literature, it also describes a way of thinking about language, narrative, and reading. Even more so than sex and pregnancy, virality blurs the lines between metaphorical and material when it is applied to language.

Viruses carry a host of negative associations and dangers, and dis-ease with discourse is part of what is registered through the comparison of language to a virus. Burroughs is suspicious of language as a controlling force, and argues that one positive effect of the cutup technique he develops in *Ticket* and the other books of The Nova Trilogy is that it disrupts language's power over its users, "perform[ing] inoculation by drawing attention to the materiality of

language" (Miller). Burroughs argues that "[h]uman behavior becomes predictable because the Word Virus writes the subject's 'life script' on his flesh with the 'soft typewriter.' In other words, language is destiny" (Wild 50). This idea is reminiscent of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of early twentieth century linguistics: the strong version of the hypothesis argues that language controls thoughts by enabling some ideas and patterns of thought and foreclosing others; the weak version argues that language merely influences ideas and thinking patterns as opposed to controlling them fully. Burroughs adds to this linguistic theory with his idea that language is therefore an addictive force on par with a drug, as well as an extraterrestrial virus. Burroughs further explains his theory "that the written word was literally a virus" in *Electronic Revolution* (1970), claiming, "The word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host" (5). Burroughs's grafting of this viral metaphor onto linguistic theory gives language an anthropomorphic, even malevolent, consciousness. Language becomes a mediation forcibly imposed on human beings from the outside, a condition to be critiqued and resisted.

Unlike Burroughs's characterization of language as an imposition from outside, the viral narratives of this chapter trouble any such division of bodily permeability into the categories of inner and outer. Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) traces the spread of a psychic virus through the United States during the 1920s. The "Jes Grew" virus, which most critics read as a stand-in for black identity and culture, emerges out of a contentious interplay between inherited predispositions and contact with outside agents. Once infected, its carriers experience a type of spiritual possession along with physical symptoms and, crucially, a sense of empathy and unity with their fellow carriers: interpenetrative consciousness is part of the contagion that Jes Grew

disseminates, not merely a method of transmission. Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1985)[57] represents posthuman evolution as a rupture from the inside-out and the outside-in together, a mutation in human biology catalyzed by an exterior nanotechnological force but effected within an individual person's body. Like Jes Grew, the "noocytes" of *Blood Music* link their human partners into a web that eventually communicates within itself empathically rather than linguistically; as in *Mumbo Jumbo*, empathy and shared consciousness are facilitated by a viral agent. Finally, China Miéville's *Embassytown* (2012) tells a story about the dangers of biologically interpenetrative language: the speech of a human Ambassador proves physically addictive to the alien Hosts who hear it, rewiring their physiology and eventually requiring them to transform their language to break their addiction and survive. *Embassytown* also complicates models of inner and outer through its concept of the "immer," a place and non-place where the novel's characters travel. The immer exists "below [the universe], or around it, or whatever," and is a kind of ur-space that is at once inside and outside of the novel's specific iteration of space (34). In *Embassytown*, empathy as a link between minds that sidesteps signification is dangerous, while the empathy that coexists with and works through signification is benign and necessary.

I have described sexual violence as an inward facing rupture and pregnancy as an outward facing rupture. That division has provided a useful map because it points to the two-way permeabilities of bodies and texts, where neither is autonomous or unitary. This division of outer from inner is only a map, however. That hypothetical model is inaccurate not only legally and discursively, but also biologically—as new materialist theorists such as Lisa Blackman and AnnMarie Mol have argued, humans are more accurately thought of as colonies, ecospheres, or

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[57] *Blood Music* was originally published as a short story in 1983, but throughout this project I refer to the expanded novel version, published in 1985.

assemblages than as individual beings. Ultimately even the classification of inner and outer reinforces an outdated humanist model of the autonomous, individual subject. Language viruses destabilize and move beyond the divisions of inner from outer by describing phenomena of bodily and textual ruptures that occur from the outside-in and the inside-out together, and that open beings to each other both affectively and biologically. This chapter catalogs empathy as a critical exploration of communication's possibilities and dangers in post-war viral fiction.

The Language-Virus-God Drug

After Burroughs's use of the language virus, other science fiction and postmodern authors who took up the same constellation of concerns include Philip K. Dick, who argues that if Burroughs's theory of language is correct, the virus is at least a benign one that "does not occlude us," rather than the malicious force Burroughs hypothesized. Dick muses in a letter, "If you grant [that language is] an occluding information virus, are you not then yourself occluded in your very analysis of it, as well as your perception of its existence? There is a paradox involved. I'm sure you can see that. And I try to deal with it in *VALIS*" (*Letters* 146). Dick's 1981 novel blends gnosticism with alien invasion in its story of extraterrestrials using a pink laser beam to communicate with humans, as they lead them toward Sophia, an incarnation of holy wisdom. Dick's exploration of language as a virus and a drug also considers it divinely inspired, then: the otherworldly forces humans encounter in *VALIS* are both alien and godlike, their communication with humans is linguistic but also pre- or extra-discursive, and the resulting encounters are hallucinatory, mystical, intoxicating, and infectious. Dick also points to the problem of perspective in any analysis of language: we have no choice but to use language to describe and

theorize language, and if language does control our thoughts, it controls what we can think about language. Dick's account emphasizes that language's viral capacities shatter ego and autonomy, for him, through their narcotic and divine resonances.

One final science fictional text important to the lineage of viral fiction is Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (1992), which, in addition to providing one of the earliest representations of something like a world wide web, also tells the story of an ancient language acting virally upon both people and computers. In *Snow Crash*, Sumerian acts as the firmware programming language of the human brainstem, and exposure to it, whether in the "Metaverse" or in the "real world," involuntarily reprograms humans, making them vulnerable to a zombie-like possession by the linguistic virus personified as the goddess Asherah. Encountering the language god in this novel is just as intoxicating as in *VALIS*, but without holy wisdom as the result. In this novel's mythology, the Sumerian god Enki is the original hacker, and the Tower of Babel moment he engineers reverses the warnings and negative associations of the myth. Enki enables ancient humanity to speak many languages, breaking people out of their vulnerability to Asherah's virus.

While the concept of the language virus predates digital culture, it flourished in popular imagination once the idioms of computer "languages" and "viruses" were widely disseminated. The metaphor of the language virus, crossing and connecting bodies, texts, and technology, is so prevalent now that it begins to sediment into catachresis, a vehicle with no tenor. Computer viruses, viral videos, memes "going viral"—these phrasings no longer need to invoke the biological viruses to which they once referred to make sense. Especially as communication technology and genetic research have evolved in the postwar era, the discourses of written

language, programming code, and genetic code have increasingly informed one another. *Snow Crash* explores and assesses the strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis through its extended metaphor of programming, making the human brain something that can be hacked like a computer. Computers and people are similarly limited and enabled by the languages that program them and, in the case of the human brain, *Snow Crash* muses, there are points of overlap between hardware, firmware, and software.[58] The danger posed by exposure to this virus is that it removes language's mediations, leaving characters empty vessels to be filled upon direct contact with Asherah. Babel's promise, in Stephenson's revision, is that linguistic mediation restores self-possession.

Human languages operate as sign systems. With the exception of onomatopoeia, there is nothing inherent in each set of letters or sounds that connects it to the concept or object to which it refers; therefore, we can think about the linguistic signifier as distinct and separable from the thing signified. Post-war viral literature's invocations of empathy explore the possibilities of communicating without the mediations of a sign system. These explorations often take the form of interlinked conceptual metaphors of language, viruses, gods, and drugs. The language-virus metaphor, applied to linguistic sign systems, works as an "information narrative," a type of story that N. Katherine Hayles argues especially highlights "a defining characteristic of the present cultural moment[:]… the belief[s] that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates," and that human consciousness is one such information pattern (35, 1). Language-virus stories treat communication between conscious beings as another information pattern that can be separated from the material substrate that carries it, whether that substrate is a

[58] *Hardware* names a physical device used in or with a computer. *Software* is intangible code installed on hardware. *Firmware* describes low-level software that interfaces with hardware rather than with users; it is meant to be read-only and not programmable by the device's users (Lundberg).

body, a text, or even linguistically formulated thought. In the information narratives Hayles studies, consciousness functions as the essence of the subject that can be lifted out of the container of that subject's body. In the info-virus texts I examine, the *content* of language can seemingly be lifted out of the *container* of language. If language is a virus, an escape from language—a transcendence of the substrate—is the implied cure. If language can be shed in favor of direct access between minds, in which affect itself is the medium and message of communication, that direct access might feel like an ego-shattering comparable to hallucination or encountering the divine, hence the confluence of references to language, viruses, gods, and drugs in info-virus stories.

Furthermore, these texts suggest that signs systems rely on empathy as both an absence and a presence. Science fictional empathy—a mind-to-mind pre- or extra-discursive link—is the impossibility that makes language necessary. If language were not a sign system, if speakers could somehow directly invoke a concept for listeners without the mediation of language, or if language had an essence of meaning inherently connected to the thing to which it referred, such a communication mode would operate similarly to the science fictional mind-meld tropes of empathy or telepathy. (In their common usage, *telepathy* refers to sharing thoughts, and *empathy* to sharing feelings. Additionally, I tease out from this distinction the idea that telepathy describes sharing linguistically formulated thoughts nonverbally, and empathy describes sharing pre- or extra-discursive affects, or concepts that are not, or not yet, solidified into language.) In a non-signifying language, a sender would conjure something up in her mind and a receiver would absorb that something exactly, without the need for the mediation of referents and with nothing lost in the interim. Even if words were involved in such a process (as in my understanding of

telepathy), they would correspond exactly with the things to which they refer—language would be transparent and enabling, not signifying and mediating.[59] Because sign systems do not function in this unmediated way, there is always slippage between the concept in the sender's mind, the words used to describe it, and the resulting concept in the receiver's mind. Science fictional empathy is therefore a structuring absence embedded within sign systems, the ideal of communication against which language always falls short. Despite the edenic promise of unmediated linguistic transparency, however, there are textual and personal advantages that accrue in the falling short.

In addition to a structuring absence of language, empathy is also an assumed condition underpinning and enabling language. Because there is no door between minds allowing unmediated access, it feels perhaps all the more mystical when a speaker puts together a seemingly arbitrary set of letters or sounds and a listener generally grasps what ideas are at work within them. There is something about the abstraction itself, I want to argue, that calls out for mind-reading, and that operates despite and through the approximations and slippages of language. Stephen King describes writing as telepathy, a process by which he puts words on a page and thereby puts thoughts in his readers' heads (*On Writing* 95). Pointing to the kinds of slippages to which I've been referring, as well as the resistant, critical, suspicious, and reparative ways readers encounter fiction, I would argue that communication functioning through a sign system is not telepathy, but is closer to empathy: it is not a one-way transmission into the mind

[59] Such an experience of unmediated, "pure" communication is depicted in a number of science fiction texts. It usually occurs as either an ability created or enabled by technology, as in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Kathryn Bigelow and James Cameron's film *Strange Days* (1995), as an innate feature of an alien consciousness or language, as in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987), or as an extrasensory ability possessed by a subset of gifted (or burdened) humans, as in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

of a reader/receiver, but cooperative co-creation of meaning.[60] Thinking back to *Parable of the Sower*, a collaborative creation of meaning is what makes empathy both "real" and, paradoxically, science fictional. Lauren and her father consider her hyperempathy disorder not real because they believe it originates within her and is not reflecting or creating a truly interactive experience. Reading the moments of that novel that suggest, in spite of those characters' beliefs, that Lauren's hyperempathy is something occurring across multiple people to which all participants contribute, her ability becomes both real and fantastic, just as all empathy is. Furthermore, it is tied to both gods and drugs; hyperempathy syndrome is caused by drug abuse during pregnancy, and Lauren is a prophet and the founder of her own religion. Communication is imbricated within and reliant on empathy, then, as its structuring absence and its shared premise. Within this context, comparing language to a drug and a god points to the ways it feels controlling and intoxicating, and any imagined escape from it feels like a shattering of the individual self. Calling language a *virus* emphasizes the ways it is physical and interpenetrating, spreads from person to person, and feels mutually embedded, invasive, and alien, living within individuals but also in the spaces between them.

And the Word Became Flesh: *Mumbo Jumbo*

Literary engagement with linguistic mediation is laden with religious significance, frequently conceiving of mediation as salvation or condemnation, and playing out in stories mythic in scope and significance. *VALIS* uses Gnostic ideas about direct contact with Sophia, and *Snow Crash* reworks the Tower of Babel story. The novels I work with in the rest of this chapter also invoke

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[60] *Suspicious* reading is a term borrowed from Rita Felski; *reparative* reading comes from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

various religious tropes and stories: *Mumbo Jumbo* syncretically combines ancient Egyptian gods with Haitian Vodoun, and *Blood Music* can be read as a Rapture and Millennium story. By far the most common religious story applied to these considerations of linguistic mediation, though, is the Fall. Burroughs invokes Eden in *The Electronic Revolution*, positing that the "in the beginning" of Genesis refers to the beginning of written history, and *Embassytown*'s characters explicitly compare the linguistic transformation at the heart of that novel to a Fall. *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music*, too, blend notions of language as the Fall into their other religious stories, often to consider whether this fall might be a fortunate one. The tropes of the Fall and the Fortunate Fall are rich and fruitful ones for these texts to make use of, as will be seen; the danger is that in working at such a religious-mythic level these texts might remove their language-virus stories from their historically specific contexts and thereby empty them of their political power. The language-virus-god-drug assemblage does not exist in a political-historical vacuum, despite the ease of writing it as a mythic story that transcends history. This chapter's first text, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, seems particularly attuned to such a danger, and stays specifically rooted to its political-historical moment even as it also crafts a larger-than-life story of religious battles, conspiracy theories, and alternate histories.

Mumbo Jumbo narrates the spread of the "Jes Grew" virus, which manifests itself in African American music, dancing, mysticism, and community, but additionally represents polytheism, posthumanist philosophies and economies, and bodily pleasure and freedom.[61] As the story unfolds, *Mumbo Jumbo* rewrites all of Western history as an epic battle between the practitioners and supporters of Jes Grew in all its forms, and its opponents, the Atonists, who

[61] The name of the virus refers to Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), who says she "just growed" and to James Weldon Johnson's famous claim that "the earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, 'jes' grew'" (Huggins 283).

stand for hierarchy, monotheism, tradition, and propriety, and who, in the book's present-day, are members of white secret societies attempting to stop this virus from spreading. The narrative follows the virus and the lives of its devoted practitioners during the 1920s as Jes Grew seeks its sacred text. PaPa LaBas, the book's human protagonist, explains to his friend Black Herman, who has asked what Jes Grew is "up to," "It's up to its Text. … I figure that it's yearning for The Work of its Word or else it will peter out as in the 1890s, when it wasn't ready and had no idea where to search. It must find its Speaking or strangle upon its own ineloquence" (33-4). The viral consciousness of Jes Grew is spread directly from person to person, but its practitioners insist that Jes Grew must be reunited with the sacred written text into which it was once encoded.

Mumbo Jumbo, written in the early 1970s by one of the "original members" of the Black Arts Movement (Thomas 38, in B. Dick), takes up questions of racial identity and cultural production as well as religious and historical myth-making, using the virus of Jes Grew as a literalization of a broad concept of "blackness" that threatens to infect and dominate the world. Reed keeps this mythic story grounded in its specific historical-political contexts by pointing to certain moments in American history—most prominently the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s—as times when American racial conflict is ripe for attention and progress; he also writes historical figures such as Warren G. Harding and Malcolm X into the novel as characters, some as themselves and some disguised. The historical embeddedness of this novel and its resulting political impact are important to its engagement with communicative empathy: especially by taking up the language-virus as a specifically raced phenomenon, *Mumbo Jumbo* keeps as a central concern the ways differently raced bodies mediate and are mediated by language at different historical moments and locations. The novel is ultimately ambivalent about embodiment as a necessity and value,

but its ties to specific historical-political contexts is one important way in which the mediation of bodies stays part of the conversation alongside the mediation of texts.

Mumbo Jumbo's ambivalence surrounding embodiment becomes apparent through the ways its language virus experiments with an information narrative philosophy. If language is a virus, there exists a "healthy" uninfected person without it, prior to it, or having been "cured" of it; even if Jes Grew is celebrated by *Mumbo Jumbo*'s heroes, it is an infection of this type. In his reading of the novel, Michael A. Chaney persuasively fits *Mumbo Jumbo* into N. Katherine Hayles's "information narrative" category, which operates through a view of information as separable from its medium, and consciousness as information. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Hayles traces the ways that information became disembodied in popular thought through the progression of cybernetics, explaining that the cybernetic understanding of intelligence as "a property of the formal manipulation of symbols rather than enaction in the human life-world" was assisted by "a definition of information… as an entity distinct from the substrates carrying it. From this formulation, it was a small step to think of information as a kind of bodiless fluid that could flow between different substrates without loss of meaning or form" (xi). Hayles argues that once messages were understood to be completely separable from their media, what resulted was the posthuman: an understanding of humanity that sees bodies as mere prostheses, that sees people as interchangeable with computers, and that (presently but not inevitably) reinscribes the (racist, sexist, classist, imperialist) shortcomings of Enlightenment humanism.

Chaney applies Hayles's argument and category of the information narrative to *Mumbo Jumbo*: posthumanist information narrative philosophy is apparent in the very fact that Jes Grew is presented as a linguistic code or program that can be instantiated in different substrates (bodies

as well as books) without losing or altering any of its essence. Jes Grew is also an autonomous information virus that pre-exists and operates free from the written text it seeks—it is information untethered from a textual medium, "a message without a material substrate, a randomness seeking expression in a symbol system or pattern" (Chaney 274). The effect of the information narrative at work in *Mumbo Jumbo* is to make texts and bodies equivalent in the same way that Hayles argues bodies and computers are equivalent in posthuman thought: Jes Grew Carriers and the Jes Grew sacred text are carriers of the same virus, encodings of the same message, in circulation together.

That said, there are many suggestions in *Mumbo Jumbo* that material substrates can change or affect the information virus, particularly in moments when black characters are said to have particular affinities for Jes Grew or be specifically important to the virus, and white characters are said to be more biologically resistant to it. By making the human body into a textual medium that carries codes, the information narrative of *Mumbo Jumbo* puts strain on one of the novel's central political debates: the nature of blackness as an identity category. Written and published in the context of the Black Arts movement, *Mumbo Jumbo* works through the conflict between essentialism and constructivism/performance central to that group of artists: is it better to understand blackness as a quality intrinsic to black people, locking them into immutable categorical otherness, or to understand blackness as a culturally constructed category, making it available for performance, appropriation, and revision by people of any race? *Mumbo Jumbo*'s understanding of human bodies as carriers of code would seem to come down on the performance side of the debate, since the message of blackness should be a separable information pattern awaiting expression in any medium. Indeed, "It knows no class no race no

consciousness," a doctor reports about Jes Grew, and the Atonists are frustrated by "[t]he egregiousness of its invasiveness. Its total catch-on abilities" (5). LaBas's mindset is described as "*a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole*" (45, italics in original). One Jes Grew carrier transmits and teaches "a diluted version" of the virus to white "tycoons and captains of industry" who seem perfectly able to contract and learn it despite their desire to do so in secret (47). The virus is even reported to be transmittable to nonhuman species, including animals and plants (105-6).

In contrast with these descriptions of universalism, however, the novel also presents and reiterates the idea that black people carry an inherited predisposition for Jes Grew, and that white people carry some form of immunity to it, an essentialist notion that complicates the novel's information narrative. LaBas is said to "carr[y] Jes Grew in him like most other folk carry genes," and he chastises a woman who wants empirical evidence of the virus by asking her, "Don't you children have your Knockings, or have you New Negroes lost your other senses, the senses we came over here with?" (23, 25-6). Black Herman refers to Jes Grew dancing as "something so deep in the race soul," and an Atonist warns, "if Jes Grew is immune to the old remedies, the saving Virus in the blood of Europe, mankind is lost" (34, 18). By the end of the book, these waters are thoroughly muddied: Jes Grew, a stand-in for blackness, is suggested to be something carried in the genes and the blood of black people, but also something to which they must be exposed. White people are said to be resistant to the virus, whether biologically or culturally, but part of what makes it so threatening to them is that it could conceivably infect everyone.

Related to this tension between essentialism and constructivism, Jes Grew operates both as a literal, biological agent and as a metaphor for a social movement; it is hard to pin down and define due to its slippages across these two registers. The Jes Grew virus manifests itself in physical symptoms, but also through shifts in consciousness, including spiritually transcendent experiences of trances, supernatural abilities, and possession by loas.[62] Even when characters describe Jes Grew in biological terms, they are careful to clarify that it is not like other viruses. "You see, it's not 1 of those germs that break bleed suck gnaw or devour," a doctor explains in the novel's first description of Jes Grew. "It's nothing we can bring into focus or categorize; once we call it 1 thing it forms into something else. No man. This is a *psychic epidemic*, not a lesser germ like typhoid yellow fever or syphilis. We can handle those. This belongs under some ancient Demonic Theory of Disease" (4-5, emphasis in original). Even when considered a biological agent, Jes Grew is recognized to have spiritual ("psychic," "Demonic") properties. Likewise, even when Jes Grew is considered a metaphorical virus, described as a movement, fad, or cult, its embodied nature remains an integral part of its transmission and effects, the Jes Grew Carriers recognizable through their enactment of an almost polymorphously perverse enjoyment of their physicality. As the novel narrates, "*Actually, Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. … Jes Grew is as electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy. Terrible plagues were due to the wrath of God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods*" (6, italics in original). Jes Grew's nebulous position between physical and spiritual, between biological and metaphorical, plays off of and informs the

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[62] I used *lwa* in chapter one following Hopkinson's spelling; here I use *loa* in keeping with Reed's spelling.

novel's political debate about the nature of blackness, reinforcing the sense some readers (including me) have of the novel's fundamental ambivalence on this issue.

Confident in his reading of Reed's portrayal of blackness as non-essentializing, Chaney argues, "So slippery is Reed's subtle waffling on this point, that his contradictoriness infects his critics" (276). It would be easier to agree with Chaney's claim that "Jes Grew is… linked to a non-exclusive raciality, rather signifying a pantheistic humanizing force" (276) if it were not for the novel's recourse to the metaphor of the virus. On one hand, invoking virality would seem to support the information narrative of *Mumbo Jumbo*, the understanding that Jes Grew is a disembodied message transferable to any bodily or textual medium, since biological and computer viruses are totalizing and equalizing in their infectious spread, and separable from their substrates—that is, curable. On the other hand, though, the very act of biologizing black culture by representing it as a viral agent positions *Mumbo Jumbo* uncomfortably at the juncture of the essential and the performed. Virality here is both an external force rupturing bodies and texts from without and an internal, inherited predisposition, causing those ruptures from within.

Ultimately *Mumbo Jumbo*, through its very ambiguity, illuminates the ways differently raced (and sexed) bodies are differently mediated and mediating within the information narrative. In representing bodies as interchangeable media for free-floating information, *Mumbo Jumbo* could do discursive damage to the specificities of bodies, as marked categories of embodiment get trampled in the virus's run toward equivalence and flattening (and, in fact, Ishmael Reed is roundly condemned for his handling of female characters, especially in his later work, but here as well[63]). But Jes Grew, while existing as an autonomous and separable virus, is both innate to

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[63] Andrew Strombeck provides a thorough overview of this feminist condemnation.

some people and contractible by all people. This paradox presents an understanding of communication as emerging from the interplay of medium, message, sender, and receiver, rather than a model of the message as completely separable from or inherent within its medium. The interplay of message and medium—*mediation*—makes the two functionally inseparable, because to transmit the same message through different media is to alter the message. In the case of blackness, even if some essence of that code could be isolated and identified, its meaning would change the instant it was embodied and performed by a specific person. Understanding empathy as the absence upon which language is built and a telos toward which linguistic communication strives but cannot reach requires a conception of information as separable from its medium. If transmitting feelings or non-discursive thoughts immediately and directly is understood as the pure or perfected version of linguistic communication, mediation is an obstacle, a necessary crutch to be discarded when possible. But understanding empathy as a presence within linguistic communication—a shared set of assumptions and co-creations of meaning underpinning and flowing through linguistic transmissions—implies an understanding of information as inextricable from its medium. In this model, losing the mediation of spoken or written language is truly losing something of the message itself.

Another uncomfortable element of the language virus story that comes to light in *Mumbo Jumbo* is the coercive nature of that narrative. The cure to the language virus, communicative empathy, is an all-or-nothing prospect. *Mumbo Jumbo*'s central story is a conspiracy theory, which Andrew Strombeck argues is an inherently oppressive and conservative form due to its appeals to totalizing meta-narratives. Strombeck, informed by Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, asserts that "forms have ideologies that often subvert the intentions of their

texts" (300). In Reed's fiction, Strombeck argues, "a common cultural logic, operating through the secret-society conspiracy theory" connects *Mumbo Jumbo* with Reed's later work accused of misogyny, specifically his 1986 novel *Reckless Eyeballing* (300). Strombeck's reading of *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Reckless Eyeballing* as together evincing "a specifically masculine nostalgia" for a simpler world order pre-posthumanism sheds light on the coercion lurking within *Mumbo Jumbo*'s engagement with communicative empathy (300). As Strombeck argues, "For the secret-society conspiracy theorist, this version of history appeals because of its totalizing explanation, its ability to encompass all sorts of disparate historical phenomenon [sic]" (302). One of Jes Grew's supposed core values is multiplicity, whereas Atonism is associated with fascistic assimilation, but Jes Grew comes perilously close to replacing one totality with another, just as Michelle Wallace contends that "Reed attempts to displace the color of the center… leaving intact, and even confirming, the notion of centers and therefore peripheries" (186 qtd. in Strombeck 303).

Jes Grew's emphasis on syncretism and plurality can be seen in the shift from "the wrath of God" to "the delight of the gods" in the passage previously quoted, which hints at the virus's scorn for monotheistic religions. PaPa LaBas and Black Herman also chastise Abdul at one point for preaching Islam, saying, "You are no different from the Christians you imitate. Atonists Christians and Muslims don't tolerate those who refuse to accept their modes. … [W]here does that leave the ancient Vodun aesthetic: pantheistic, becoming, 1 which bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as the imagination can hold" (34-5). Later, LaBas thinks to himself, "It's all over the place, isn't it. I should have known. Different methods. Different signs, but all taking you where you want to go" (139). And the novel's narration muses, "*Individuality. It couldn't be*

herded, rounded-up; it was like crystals of winter each different from one another but in a storm going down together. What would happen if they dispersed, showing up when you least expected them; what would happen if you couldn't predict their minds?" (140, italics in original). But it is in the single destination at the end of multiple paths, the all-accepting, all-co-opting, all-assimilating gesture at its core that the self-contradiction of syncretism is revealed. Syncretic belief systems, even while they claim to preserve individuality, perpetuate one-world philosophies through their assimilative nature—just as conspiracy theories, even as they condemn the small group of powerful men controlling the world, perpetuate an understanding of the world that reduces all complexity and multiplicity into one inescapable system. If all paths lead to the same place, individuals are not truly free to choose their own paths in any meaningful way.[64] If all gods meld together in syncretic practice, polytheism is nothing but another form of monotheism. If one secret society defeats another secret society in order to replace it, nothing has actually changed. This coercive push toward a singular philosophy is a dangerous tendency in this novel, especially considering the viral transmission of Jes Grew, which tends to operate without individuals' consent: becoming a Jes Grew Carrier, although it is sought out by some characters, is largely out of people's conscious control.

The coercion of Jes Grew itself, in addition to the totalizing thrust of the novel's conspiracy theory, is in what the virus transmits to its carriers: a more direct experience of communication, where the word is the thing it invokes—where the word is made flesh. The values the Atonists stand for work through mediation, because they work through obfuscation, hierarchy, and a model of self-possession that assumes people are and should be in control of

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[64] In this way, *Mumbo Jumbo* begins to feel like *Heavy Rain*, presenting an illusion of agency overlaid on top of a totalizing narrative.

their own consciousnesses. Jes Grew, for all its supposed celebration of the individual, functions through direct encounter with loas—who PaPa LaBas believes should have unrestricted access to people's minds (217). Uniting the Jes Grew virus with its sacred text, it is suggested, would make that written text a purer, unmediated kind of communication, where a person opening the book would not read it but instead would have his head opened by the book's loa and receive its transmission whole and uncorrupted. It is the same danger *Snow Crash*'s language virus would pose twenty years later, except that in *Mumbo Jumbo* that surrender of self-possession is presented as a desirable state.

When the Jes Grew virus fails to find and rejoin its sacred text in the 1920s of the novel, the hope remains that the virus will survive to try again at a more fortuitous time, and it is hinted that perhaps *Mumbo Jumbo* itself is this successful juncture of virus and text. The epilogue of the book finds PaPa LaBas, now one hundred years old in the early 1970s, delivering a guest lecture at a university for the occasion of a holiday commemorating Jes Grew. The final paragraph of the novel reads:

> People in the 60s said they couldn't follow him. (In Santa Cruz the students walked out.) What's your point? they asked in Seattle whose central point, the Space Needle, is invisible from time to time. What are you driving at? they would say in Detroit in the 1950s. In the 40s he haunted the stacks of a ghost library. In the 30s he sought to recover his losses like everybody else. In the 20s they knew. And the 20s were back again. Better. Arna Bontemps was correct in his new introduction to *Black Thunder*. Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around. *(Locomobile rear*

moving toward neoned Manhattan skyline. Skyscrapers gleam like magic trees. Freeze frame.)

Jan. 31st, 1971 3:00 PM

Berkeley, California

This ending (followed by an extensive "partial bibliography") situates PaPa LaBas and Jes Grew in relation to a historical trajectory, both participating in it and able to transcend it, but the novel also places itself at the endpoint of that trajectory. The final, cinematic parenthetical makes a point of reminding readers that LaBas is in New York, making the sign-off from Berkeley a clear insertion of Reed's own authorial presence. In this closing gesture, the novel makes a bold claim for its own importance as the litany for Jes Grew's liturgy.

The singular philosophy being espoused and worked toward through the virus's coerced surrender of self-possession is *communicative empathy*, the fantasy of immediate, perfect transmission of ideas and feelings without the need for linguistic communication. The sense of affective unity with the whole world, the priority placed on direct experience over reading, and the possession of Carriers by loas all point toward this goal. Paradoxically, although *Mumbo Jumbo* positions itself as the fulfillment of that goal, it does not attempt to efface its own mediation, and is instead self-referential in the extreme, never letting readers escape its hyper-textuality. One way to unravel this seeming paradox is by understanding postmodern metafictional practices and self-effacing attempts at immediacy as two sides of the same coin. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Gruisin argue in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, the twin impulses of immediacy and hypermediation "not only coexist in digital media today but are mutually dependent" (6). This argument from new media studies applies equally well to old

media such as *Mumbo Jumbo*, which is hypermediated not through the use of many different media, but through the use of many different textual genres and forms. Bolter and Gruisin claim, "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). *Mumbo Jumbo* makes a play for becoming that directly transmitted textual object that readers would absorb rather than read, and it does so through its proliferation of textuality.

In addition to self-referentiality, *Mumbo Jumbo*'s textual hypermeditations express themselves in experimental form—notably, the jarring use of numerals instead of written numbers, frequent changes in font, and extensive paratextual and intertextual content such as: extended quotations, footnotes, backmatter, fliers, business cards, photographs, illustrations, a handwritten note, and many other "subtexts, pretexts, posttexts, and narratives-within-narratives" (Gates 221). These paratexts, many existing in "the intersection of Western book culture with academe" (McCoy 607), implicate the reader as well as the author as actants within the text by continually drawing attention to the reader's position and practices. *Mumbo Jumbo*'s hypertextuality also intersects with the project of revisionary history so central to its plot. It does so by evoking and experimenting with historical African-American meanings attached to textuality, oral histories, and literacy, as well as histories of official documentation (bills of sale, freedom-granting papers, laws and proclamations), and cultural genocide under slavery and Jim Crow. *Mumbo Jumbo*'s engagement with textual history points to the politics of textuality and storytelling within these specific racial and national contexts, asking readers to consider the stories that become history, who is authorized to write, read, challenge, and revise them, and their own complicity within history's ongoing narratives. For all its embrace of textuality,

however, *Mumbo Jumbo* half-facetiously claims to enroll its readers into its textual projects through the code of Jes Grew, supposedly instantiated in the novel and potentially spread in unmediated form to any who open its pages. Hypertextuality in *Mumbo Jumbo* ultimately comes across as a tool for achieving a certain kind of communicative experience that would prefer not to have to work through texts at all.

If *Mumbo Jumbo* embraces hypermediation as a path to communicative empathy, Greg Bear's *Blood Music* tells almost the reverse story, in which communicative immediacy is achievable in and of itself. Whereas *Mumbo Jumbo*'s agenda seems at times to be a paradoxical embrace of linguistic mediation that seeks to render itself obsolete by bringing readers to a point of direct access, *Blood Music*'s thought experiment is much simpler. In this novel, human linguistic communication becomes irrelevant, because there are no more humans.

The View From Inside: *Blood Music*

In viral literature, communicative empathy—the idea of sending and receiving, telling and listening, even writing and reading, without words—seems to require and produce states of deeply interpenetrative viral consciousness. These states are alternately fantasies and nightmares, utopian yet coercive. They are rapturous redemptions from this fallen world of words, or they are themselves the fall out of higher consciousness into sin and animal nature. Viral consciousness can take the form of posthuman transcendence, subhuman zombie states, or radically nonhuman otherness, but however it manifests, it seems to have extreme alterity as a precondition for the empathic transcendence of linguistic communication. In the estrangement of the Singularity

found in Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, communicative empathy carries some of its most alluring promises and encounters some of its most intractable limitations.

Blood Music is the quintessential "grey goo" story and one of the earliest depictions of nanotechnology. It begins with a loner scientist, Vergil Ulam, creating microscopic "autonomous organic computers" using a mixture of mammalian, viral, and bacterial genetic material (15). He monitors the cells' evolution at his workplace until his employer discovers the project and orders him to destroy the samples; instead, Vergil injects them into his bloodstream, planning to retrieve them once he can get to another lab. Things, predictably, take a turn. The "noocytes," as Vergil calls them, evolve rapidly within his body, soon becoming self-aware, and then transforming Vergil, first into a better version of himself and then beyond anything recognizably human. The noocytes spread to other people and lifeforms, mutating and assimilating them as well, until most of North America is incorporated into one massive blob of nanotechnological goo. Eventually most of the planet is converted, and the novel ends with the suggestion that the noocyte mass (the "noosphere") will next evolve into a state of pure thought, no longer dependent upon any physical form. As the figure of the scientist is inevitably made into the victim of his own experiments and the object of scientific inquiry as well as the subject, the novel shifts through an array of narrative perspectives, each in turn becoming untenable. And as all of humanity begins sharing memories and thoughts, communication—including that between narrator and reader—undergoes its own ontological crisis.

Despite my overall focus on virality as a metaphor for language, the spread of information, or a certain kind of consciousness, the viral experience in this "hard" SF novel is primarily material. Although it is a signature science fictional move to literalize that which is

normally metaphorical and to biologize that which is normally social, *Blood Music* moves in the reverse direction and performs a re-biologization: viruses are physical entities that have been made metaphors by and of language, and *Blood Music* makes those metaphors into a new physical reality.[65] The "virus" of this novel thereby invokes the language-virus-god-drug lineage even while it is primarily the story of a biological evolution. This combination of the material and the metaphorical stages an extended exploration of the effects of an external virus upon linguistic communication, as well as the ways communication is already informed by its metaphors of virality. In this novel it is language as well as bodies that are ruptured both from within and from without.

Perhaps obviously, this novel comes from a very different generic and political place than *Mumbo Jumbo*, making the similarities between their uses of the language-virus trope all the more significant. But because *Blood Music* draws primarily upon discourses of nanotechnology and Singularity narratives within hard science fiction, it seems much less politically and historically aware than *Mumbo Jumbo*, and it is much worse at handling issues of race—or even considering them necessary to the conversations it enters around communicative empathy and mediation. (Edward's clumsy attempt to imagine how foreign the noocytes are to humans by telling himself they are "unimaginably stranger than Chinese" [85] might be the only overt reference to non-white people in the whole book.)

That said, in some ways *Blood Music* is more nuanced and thoughtful than *Mumbo Jumbo* in grappling with the embodiment of the language-virus, as well as its implications for gender and sexuality. As becomes clear in *Mumbo Jumbo*'s use of the information narrative,

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[65] This re-biologizing move is why I take the liberty of considering *Blood Music*'s noocytes viral in effect even though they are technically a combination of viral, bacterial, and animal genes.

communicative empathy has a body problem. The specificities of bodies are the final, inescapable mediations that make direct communication both desirable and impossible; it seems inevitable that these tales of viral consciousness seek to rupture, escape, or transcend bodies. Attempts at bypassing the mediations of specific bodies are doomed to fail, however, and often blithely sidestep (and reenact) the flaws of liberal humanism, where ignoring specificities of embodiment does damage to bodies in marked categories (non-white, non-male, etc.) *Blood Music*'s grey goo plot at least has the benefit of telling a hyper-embodied story for the majority of the book, staging an escape from mediated communication that takes quite a while to leave behind physical bodies.

Blood Music's intense, at times grotesque, focus on bodies plays out in several related philosophical and narrative tensions. *Blood Music* implicitly poses the following questions: if the human as we know it does not survive in this tale of nanotechnological evolution, and if the individual subject and the self-contained human body are absorbed into a nanotechnological blob, how do the resulting merged consciousnesses perceive the world around themselves? How do they communicate their perceptions to the other former humans inside the noosphere with them, the few who remain outside, or those of us reading their stories? If these posthumans no longer have eyes, ears, or skin as we currently think of them, or if they share these sensory organs with others, how do they make sense of the information those organs gather—especially if the parts of their brains that process that information are now also shared among many merged consciousnesses? The fundamental reorganization of observation and thought staged within *Blood Music* is closely tied to the roles and practices of the scientist characters, but it also poses a significant challenge to the narration of the story, linking the scientist characters and the third-

person narrator together as observers and reporters. Is the grey goo story, then—the end of the individual that is still inevitably told by an individual narrative voice—a self-contradiction? Does it tell the story of its own obsolescence?

This kind of Singularity literature is what Vernor Vinge refers to when he describes writers coming up against "an opaque wall across the future" (13). Rather than setting its story far in the future, well past "the unknowable… soon" of the Singularity (13, ellipses in original), *Blood Music* writes through the wall and attempts to show us the transition. In the process, *Blood Music* reveals the compromised, embedded position the novelist and narrator have always held, as well as the compromised, embedded position of the scientist. There is no such thing as observing from the outside, and the novel's attempts at detached, dispassionate storytelling reveal the falsity of any scientific or narrative claims of a view from nowhere. In this way, *Blood Music* assents to the core arguments of standpoint theory, that knowledge depends on the subject's position and is shaped by its cultural context (Keller and Longino). I have referred to literature as a laboratory for empathic play and practice, invoking that metaphor to suggest a certain cloistering of literature from the "real world." *Blood Music* powerfully suggests that there is no outside, that the only position from which to observe, experiment, or analyze is from within, and that our literary laboratories are deeply intertwined with the so-called "real world" beyond their pages.

Enabling the text's deconstruction of the scientific gaze, and ultimately its engagement with communicative empathy, *Blood Music*'s posthuman future is one in which perception itself must adapt, primarily by relying on senses other than vision. Early in the novel this shift is prefigured by an overemphasis on eyes and visual technology. Scientists access their work by

looking at it on video and through microscopes—Vergil and his coworkers watch a video of blood flow and he thinks, “If his lymphocytes could see, this was what they would experience” (26). Vergil’s microscope is connected through a video feed to four display screens, and it is here that readers first peek over his shoulder to see the noocytes (23). Aside from optical technology, Vergil’s eyes also carry heavy significance: early in the story readers are told Vergil’s “sole distinction was an exquisite pair of emerald green eyes, wide and expressive, defended by a luxurious set of lashes. The eyes were more decorative than functional, however; they were covered by a large pair of black-framed glasses. Vergil was near-sighted” (10-1). This note later becomes significant: his vision is one of the first things the noocytes fix after infecting him (39).

As the nanotechnological evolution gets underway, characters are increasingly incapable of understanding what is happening to them through vision. After communicating directly with the noocytes inside him, Michael Bernard, another scientist and one of the first people to whom Vergil’s noocytes spread, closes his eyes to think (174). This moment is suggestive of a shift in the later part of the novel away from prioritizing vision above the other senses, a necessary change as the characters in *Blood Music* find vision inadequate for perceiving their changing world. Suzy, one of the last humans to succumb to the grey goo transformation, looks at the noocytes in the glowing river and thinks “I’m never going to understand this” (135). Shortly thereafter, though, Suzy “hear[s] something beyond hearing: the sound of the change, the plague and the river and the drifting sheets, like a big church choir with all its members’ mouths wide open, singing silence”: what she hears is the “blood music” of the book’s title (135).

Bernard’s journal also reports that when the noocytes communicate with him, they sometimes do so visually, but sometimes through other senses, “mostly taste, a sense which

seems particularly attractive to them" (163). Indeed, Vergil explains to Bernard at one point that the noocytes are "trying to understand what space is. That's tough for them. They break distances down into concentrations of chemicals. For them, space is a range of taste intensities" (77). As new people are brought into the noocyte fold, they too must sense and understand the world differently, increasingly without relying on sight. The people remaining outside the noosphere continue to use visual technology for as long as they can—after Bernard is placed in isolation, he is examined remotely by tools outfitted with video cameras, and once the goo takes over North America, it is through infrared images taken by spy satellites that the rest of the world knows what is happening (138, 131)—but seeing is neither understanding nor controlling, and those within the noosphere cease to rely on vision at all.

This shift away from vision is catalyzed by and carries implications for *Blood Music*'s understanding of posthuman subjectivity as a collective consciousness, which in turn informs the text's engagement with communicative empathy. Late in the process of the grey goo takeover, the nanotechnological beings attempt to explain to Bernard their idea of subjectivity, as well as their methods of communication. Bernard has a conversation with the cells inside himself during which he asks to speak to an individual, and the noocytes reply that they have no concept of the individual—they say that cell clusters are the smallest unit they experience, and "**Information is passed between clusters sharing in assigned tasks**" (174). "**What you think of as INDIVIDUAL**," they continue, "**may be spread throughout the *totality***" (174).

Friction can be sensed, however, between this articulation of a collective consciousness, and a certain lingering of the individual within the crowd and outside it. Conflicting notions of the self appear in the various descriptions of human-noocyte merger. The noocyte cells are

described as part of the people they "infect" (48-9, 108), rebuilding them "from the inside out" (65), or "converting" them (132), but they are also separate, intelligent beings who inhabit humans (78). At times Vergil is described as an environment with many creatures inside of him (76, 81, 85), but at other times the creatures *are* him, or they are what he becomes. Individuals who have been transformed and incorporated into the goo merge with the noosphere, but they do seem to have the ability to come to the foreground of the collective and experience something like personal consciousness as they used to know it, their voices emerging like soloists from a chorus. Participation within the noocyte collective at times even leads to a strange kind of narcissism, as Vergil marvels that the noocytes originally "thought I was the universe," then calls himself "a goddamned galaxy," and Edward thinks about Vergil's transformation, "No wonder he had seemed to be going crazy. Buried in some inner perspective" (76, 81, 108). In short, Vergil and the other human characters feel themselves to be both singular and many: their bodies and selves are individuals with others inside of them, individuals within a horde, and dissolving or transforming into a composite being with many constituent parts.

Relatedly, *Blood Music*'s transition away from sight is also important because it suggests and produces a transition away from relationships defined by distance and borders toward relationships of closeness and permeability.[66] Human senses define the boundary between inside and outside at its most immediate. Vision allows for a false sense of distance and separation between the observer and the observed, whereas other senses make people aware of the ways the world moves through them as they move through the world: sound waves, flavors, aromas, and

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[66] Here *Blood Music* once again echoes the concerns of some feminists scholars who critique over-reliance on vision, and the metaphor of vision for knowledge, as valuing distance over closeness and supporting a division between subject and object (Brennan, Keller and Grontkowski). This shift away from vision also recalls *Surfacing*'s engagements with the fetal ultrasound and that protagonist's negotiations of the individuation and projection that visual technology can facilitate.

physical sensations operate at the interface between interior senses of self and exterior senses of environments. When the entire world of *Blood Music* combines into one conscious mass, vision, which requires and perpetuates distance, is not only impossible but irrelevant.

This displacement of vision from its role as the dominant sense is one of the ways *Blood Music* also displaces the figure of the scientist. The traditional image of the scientist, one that crosses over from "real world" scientists to those found in literature, is that of an outside observer who dispassionately gathers data, tests hypotheses, and reports results. Donna Haraway points to the ways the political and the physiological are yoked together in scientific narratives, and she claims that both science and language, rather than simply documenting or recording objective reality, in fact create reality and are contests over public knowledge.[67] The "view from nowhere" that *Blood Music* deconstructs therefore applies to narrative perspective as well as the supposedly objective position of scientists.

As the scientists within *Blood Music* find their authority and position shaken—after Bernard voluntarily confines himself to a German laboratory to be studied, he is taken aback at the behavior of his fellow scientists, who talk about him as though is not present and "politely enough" subject him to endless meetings, "a battery of tests," and "questions about every aspect of his life" (130)—so too is the third-person omniscient narrator of the novel put under the microscope. The objective narrator tied to a supposedly unbiased scientific perspective is a myth, but in this post-Singularity world, so too is any perspective that attempts to align itself with one character. Philip K. Dick's question about language as a virus becomes ever more relevant to this

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[67] See chapters one, four, and five of *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

all-consuming epidemic: “If you grant an occluding information virus, are you not then yourself occluded in your very analysis of it, as well as your perception of its existence?”

Furthermore, as in *Mumbo Jumbo*, there is a certain amount of coercion in the assimilative force of the noocytes, echoing the totalizing narrative of the language-virus that can never be escaped or cured. *Blood Music* points to this coercion even more directly than *Mumbo Jumbo* does, revealing it to be problematic, and even embracing the range of affective reactions it produces in characters and readers, moving through shock, disgust, and horror as well as sublimity and utopian longing. The stubborn continuation of the individual within the collective is one form of pushback against this coercive force pushing humanity toward unmediated communication. Another emblem of resistance is Suzy, who the noocytes allow to opt out of joining them for as long as she pleases. The exception the grey goo makes for her only highlights the fact that no one else had a choice, and at a certain point her resistance becomes pointless: when she finally “chooses” to join the noosphere, it is because the alternative is being left to die on a barren planet.

As with *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Blood Music* also operates through a totalizing one-world-system narrative (here a biological evolution rather than a conspiracy theory), and as with *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Blood Music* reflects that totalizing impulse in its narrative choices. *Blood Music* has an unstable perspective, seeming to attempt to retain a standard third-person narrative in a post-Singularity context, but also gesturing toward capturing a number of individual and collective perspectives within and outside the planet. The novel kills and leaves behind human characters, handing off the focus of the novel as the third-person omniscient narrator follows several individual characters in turn. Vergil, the book’s first protagonist and focalizer, “dies” ninety-five

pages into the 260-page book. The next person to be infected after Vergil and his girlfriend is Edward, and the narrator follows him for a scant fifteen pages before moving on again.

Blood Music also includes conversations between the goo and the humans, and experiments with handing the text's normally singular voice off to the crowd. In one of the earliest such experiments, almost before anything noticeable happens to Vergil there is a short break in the narration when he begins to fall asleep and something new inserts itself into his thoughts and into the narrative voice. What follows is written like poetry: "Vergil settled into watchfulness, watching nothing, and thought with no object— / really trying to avoid / —waiting until morning / trying to avoid / thoughts of all things lost / and all recently gained that could be / lost / he isn't ready / and still he moves and shakes / losing" (39). Although the whole book is written in third person, the "he" here in "he isn't ready" is different. It isn't the voice of an unobtrusive narrator observing Vergil's actions and his thoughts for the reader; it is the voice of the noocytes communicating among themselves—and once readers realize that is who is speaking, they can also ask who is "waiting until morning."

The voice of the noocytes becomes even more noticeable and experimental when they begin to communicate directly with Vergil, and later with Edward and Bernard:

> The harmonic orchestral sensation returned, beats coordinating into recognizable fragments, the fragments coalescing, coming into a focus of meaning, and suddenly—
>
> **Is there DISCOMFORT?**
>
> —Yes.
>
> He answered automatically and in kind, as if he had expected the exchange and was ready for a long conversation.

PATIENCE. There are difficulties.

—What? I don't understand—

***Immune response*. *Conflict*. Difficulties.**

—Leave us, then! Go away!

Not possible. Too INTEGRATED. (107)

The cells' language is presented in bold, sometimes in all caps, and often with asterisks around groups of words seemingly to indicate gestalt ideas with no direct translations into human language. The notion of a gestalt concept transmitted in such a way as to bypass language raises the thorny question of whether any ideas can exist before or outside of language, as well as the fantasy of a fully transparent, empathic language. The fact that even these holistic ideas, such as *totality* and *immune response* must be presented to readers of *Blood Music* in words highlights the necessity of approximation in the telling of this post-Singularity tale. A paradox emerges where the longing for escape from linguistic mediation can only be expressed in language; the closest approximation of that empathic state requires narrative.

Blood Music's attempt at representing a collective consciousness that increasingly has no use for language reaches a breaking point when there are no humans left unincorporated into the goo. At the end of the novel, the narration briefly shifts completely into the group perspective of the noosphere only to retreat once again to an individual focus. In one of the final chapters, the noocytes depart the physical plane, leaving behind a few isolated humans on a vastly changed planet. The next year, the novel indicates, the noosphere returns to Earth and the narrative returns to Suzy, who hears a sound like the droning of bees, knows instinctively that it is "the last night of the world," and is taken by the noosphere (258). In the final moment of the chapter, "The

Noosphere shook loose its wings. Where the wings touched, the stars themselves danced, celebrated, became burning flakes of snow" (269). This global perspective is not the end, however. In an epilogue, Bernard meets Olivia, a long-lost love, to replay a pivotal moment in their relationship, "sensing a very different potential between them now. The way had been cleared" (261). In this scene, the noocytes fulfill a promise they made to Bernard when he was first "encoded" and became aware of sharing his memories: at the time, they tell him that in the "Thought Universe" he can draw from all of human memory to revise and live out alternate versions of his past (223). Bernard and Olivia's final memory-scene ends on a note of hope, and then the noocytes take over with their bold typeface and poetic line breaks: "**Nothing is lost. Nothing is forgotten. / It was in the blood, the flesh, / And now it is forever**" (262). Complicating this romantic sentiment, the noocytes had previously admitted that they could not locate Olivia within the collective, and at the time, Bernard had responded that he was "not interested in dreams" (223). It is unclear in the fulfillment of this promise whether Olivia's consciousness is present with Bernard's, he has changed his mind about dreams, or neither is present and the noosphere acts out their scene as a collective.

This final scene is significant for at least two reasons: the first is that although a non-personal, collective perspective is possible, it is not appealing, on a narrative level or for the characters themselves (the traces of the former humans or the noosphere as a character). It is possible to read this final scene as suggesting that the formerly individual characters retain enough of their autonomous selves to play out personal fantasies, and that some (whether Bernard and Olivia or Bernard alone) choose to dwell in their individual pasts—that, having arrived at the afterlife of the noosphere, they use the limitless power and potential of that

position to pretend they are still human. It is also possible that individual characters do not retain themselves; readers can interpret this scene as the whole noosphere collectively indulging in the thought of past romance between two humans, choosing this moment from the entire store of human experience. Either way, the transcendence of the individual subject in this book, for all its allure, is not ultimately as desirable, to the characters or the text, as two individuals enjoying a mediated, verbal conversation. The transcendence of linguistic communication that *Blood Music* has pushed toward throughout the story either reaches a point of failure and collapses back in on itself, resorting to the voices of two individual people and a chorus commenting upon them—or is successful and must at this point leave the pages of the book (and the reader) behind.

Secondly, the ending of the novel also points toward the role sexuality and love play throughout the text, and their ramifications for the concept of communicative empathy. The figure of the scientist that is so thoroughly destabilized by *Blood Music*'s narrative experiments, in addition to his associations with visuality, is also overtly gendered. Brian Attebery and John Rieder both explore the relationship in science fiction between the scientist and his research, upon which he gazes and thereby masters (Attebery 47-52, Rieder 6-10). The scientist subject is coded male, and the object of his gaze, whether person, animal, landscape, or petri dish, is coded female. The noocytes, as the book's primary object of scientific inquiry and gaze, are no exception: the very word "noocyte" invokes "oocyte." As these feminized cells infect—and even in a sense impregnate—the male scientists, the noocytes also emerge as a queer and trans* force within this narrative. (It is no coincidence that Edward, the first doctor to examine Vergil, is a gynecologist.) In addition to their asexual reproduction through parthenogenesis and the way they make gender irrelevant as they subsume humans into the noosphere, the noocytes are also

trans* in the sense invoked by Myra Hird, who writes “I want to extend feminist interest in trans as a specifically sexed enterprise (as in transitioning from one sex to another), but also in a broader sense of movement across, through and perhaps beyond traditional classifications” (37). Mel Y. Chen takes up this usage of trans* in studies of non-human animals and even non-living forces such as toxicity, examining the ways cultural constructs of race and gender adhere outside of human bodies—the noocytes’ flow across boundaries of all categories (the human, the mammalian, the living, the terrestrial) extends their trans*-ness to a scale far beyond human sex and gender even while demonstrating the ways categories of sex and gender already spread outside of human boundaries.

The links between the noocytes and sexuality in *Blood Music* are many, and, despite the radical trans*-ness of the grey goo, mostly unsurprising. The evolution of humanity is an enterprise steeped in penetration and reproduction, after all, even if the reproductive futurism of the novel is asexual, strongly tied to the death drive, and in that sense queer. What is harder to reconcile is the pervasive connection *Blood Music* draws between the noocytes and *love*. As the final scene of the novel makes clear, romantic love depends on the existence of individual consciousnesses, suggesting that the grey goo evolution would render love obsolete. Romance should also be inimical to the “hard” SF trappings of this novel, yet love plays a key role throughout the story.

Vergil feels “seduced” by the noocytes from the start of the book, and openness and seduction continue to provide metaphors for human relationships, human-noocyte relationships, and human relationships altered by the noocytes. Soon after he injects himself, Vergil meets and begins dating Candace, and his feelings for her are tangled up with the transformation he

undergoes in body and mind. Vergil attributes his gradual evolution to his relationship until he is forced to admit that the changes he undergoes cannot be the results of love: “Looking better, feeling better—and no excuse for it. He wasn’t sentimental enough to believe that love cured all, even calling what he felt for Candace love. Was it?” (44). Vergil’s friend Edward describes “science, for Vergil, [as] an unattainable woman, who suddenly opens her arms to him” (62), and Vergil confirms that during his work, “[w]hole stretches of the genomes seemed to open themselves up to the process” (66). It is not only Vergil who combines love and science: Bernard describes his relationship with his ex-wife by saying “[t]hey had orbited around each other like moon and planet, never really touching” and then thinks, “Perhaps I won’t even need an isolation chamber. … I’m pretty damn isolated already” (105, 106). The closest couple of the novel is Edward and his wife Gail, and after they are infected, they decide to die in each other’s arms. Instead they live, and “Edward and Gail grew together on the bed, substance passing through clothes, skin joining where they embraced and lips where they touched” (109). This moment is the first in which two human characters physically merge under the influence of the noocytes, but it prefigures the way all of humanity will eventually join in an endless group embrace.

Even more fundamentally, the mutual permeability of the noocytes and the people they encounter can be understood through a framework of love. Colin Milburn writes, “It therefore appears that what nanofiction expresses—even in its most paranoid depictions of nanotechnological horrors—is a fundamental openness to the other already ‘inside, part of us by now.’ I would even suggest that this openness to the other inside begins to perform as something very much like *love*” (Bear 138 qtd. in Milburn 301, emphasis in original). Love, in this formulation, is openness. As Milburn explains, “The splatter-disintegration of the body thus

literalizes a love that does not simply give *to* the other, but gives *of* the other as the alterity in itself, gives *up* the other as an excess that both is and is not itself. So it is less a giving than an opening—an *unpacking*—that exposes itself to the encounter with difference, excavating the others within" (302, emphasis in original). I would add that such an opening encounter with difference can also be called *empathy*.

Indeed, the series of related tensions in this novel—between autonomy and permeability, vision and other senses, distance and closeness, the recognition that truly omniscient narration is impossible and the novel's continued reliance on its tropes—can all be thought of as working through a conflict between closedness and openness. What Milburn points to in his readings of "the postbiological body" in nanofiction is an inward-diving perspective, a recognition in *Blood Music* that the noocytes and the humans are already mutually constituted, and a sense of fellow-feeling that can emerge from such a recognition. Where this notion of love breaks down, though, is precisely in that sameness. If recognition of similarity is required for love (or empathy), actual sameness at a certain point becomes self-love, or projection onto the empathetic object.

Similarly, the extreme permeability presented in *Blood Music* results in one large mass of goo, impermeable because there is nothing else to permeate. When the trans*-forming force of the noocytes ungenders the entire world, trans* as a category no longer carries any meaning. The fantasy of communicative empathy at work in this text—the tantalizing possibility of an escape from linguistic mediation—results in the complete evacuation of the other. An unmediated conversation is ultimately only possible inside oneself, at which point it is no longer a conversation. The ending of the book suggests that once this goal of immediacy is accomplished, there is not only no one left to talk to, but nothing left to say. The individual subject must remain,

whether in reality or in the collective fantasy of the goo, because without that subject there is neither love nor communication—both affective and communicative empathy, in reaching toward their seeming endpoints, destroy themselves. The empathy that functions as a structuring absence in sign systems, the immediacy toward which language strives, proves not only impossible but even undesirable. The empathy that emerges as an underlying presence in sign systems—the shared nonverbal assumptions, affects, and cooperation that function through mediation, and that is alluded to in the final scene of flirtation between Bernard and Olivia—takes its place. Empathy describes experiences of bridging distances, and as such, requires distance. In *Blood Music*, it turns out, nanofiction is love, and true empathy requires the very mediation it strives to transcend.

"The Sounding of the Soul Itself": *Embassytown*

If the ending of *Blood Music* asks what happens if paradise is not all it is cracked up to be, China Miéville's *Embassytown* (2011) answers that question. Both novels work through the trope of the Fortunate Fall, a narrative of implied progress in its typical deployment: if the fall out of perfection is fortunate because it sets the conditions for grace, allowing humans to earn their way back to paradise, the beginning of the story predicts and determines its subsequent narrative unfolding. *Blood Music* takes place at the end of that narrative, when humanity has earned its way back into Eden, not through grace but through scientific know-how. The crisis at the novel's ending is that perfection turns out to be boring and lonely—the promised land makes people nostalgic for their forty years of desert wandering. In contrast, *Embassytown*'s fall is fortunate

for entirely different reasons, suggesting that leaving paradise is fortunate because, as a limiting and static condition, it is not a place worth staying.

Embassytown takes place on the planet Arieka, a distant outpost of the known universe. The titular city is a colony of a more centrally located planet, Bremen, and is populated by "exoterre" humans as well as Ariekei, the planet's dominant native species, who the local humans often call "Hosts." The novel tells the first-person story of Avice Benner Cho, an interstellar traveler, who has returned to her hometown of Embassytown with her non-native husband Scile, a human linguist. Because of her status as a minor local celebrity vaguely connected to functionaries within the colonial government, Avice is well-positioned to witness and intervene in the political and linguistic revolutions that shape the novel's story.

Both *Mumbo Jumbo*'s and *Blood Music*'s thematic engagements with viral consciousness and the limits of linguistic and textual communication can be considered through the lens of communicative empathy, but neither of these novels uses that terminology. *Embassytown*, on the other hand, invokes empathy directly, in its explanations of the ways the Hosts' language operates. As Scile explains, this language (simply called Language by the human characters) is "organised noise, like all of ours are, but for them each word is a funnel. Where to us each word *means* something, to the Hosts, each is an opening. A door, through which the thought of that referent, the thought itself that reached for that word, can be seen" (55, emphasis in original). The immediacy and purity of this nonhuman language is in a sense the elusive telos toward which *Mumbo Jumbo*'s and *Blood Music*'s language plots point. *Embassytown* explores the nuances and consequences of a language that has such a one-to-one relationship with empathy, and suggests that such a language cannot long survive contact with a sign system. In a trajectory

opposite to *Blood Music*'s, in which a sign system strives to break free from mediation, *Embassytown* tells the story of a language evolving out of immediacy, into a sign system.[68]

Embassytown's plot moves Language through several transformations. At the beginning of the story, Language creates direct access between speaker and listener. In the same conversation during which Scile compares Language to a funnel or a door, he also explains to Avice that in Language "[t]he sounds aren't where the meaning lives," as in English or "Anglo-Ubiq," the lingua franca of these future humans (55). As a result, although humans and other species who have learned Language can record it phonetically and read it, the Hosts communicate only verbally. Written Language means nothing to them, because they can sense no mind behind it. Similarly, any artificial intelligence programmed to speak in Language sounds like gibberish to Hosts, as do the first humans who attempt to speak in Language. The Ariekei each have two mouths, and they speak different sounds simultaneously that together communicate an idea. Humans are physically unable to speak Language individually, but when they speak in pairs the Ariekei cannot perceive the mind behind their words—the door does not open, because the two humans are thinking and feeling different things. Quoting Hegel, Scile tells Avice, "The human voice can apprehend itself as the sounding of the soul itself" (55). He then explains, "'It's not true, not for the human voice. But the Ariekei… when they speak they *do* hear the soul in each voice. That's how the meaning lives there. The words have got…' He shook his head, hesitating, then just using that religiose term. 'Got the soul in them. And it has to be there, the meaning. Has to be true to be Language'" (56, ellipses in original). The element of

[68] Much as Octavia Butler's work explicitly and repeatedly takes up issues of constrained agency, China Miéville consciously invokes and works through linguistic and semiotic theories in this novel. *Embassytown* reads as much like a critical work in its own right as a novel.

Language that Scile alludes to here is the primary thing he and other purists lament the loss of after Language evolves into a sign system: the fact that Hosts cannot lie.

Into this edenic scene of perfect honesty and community comes trouble. The humans who are eventually successful at speaking with the Hosts work as Ambassadors, and traditionally in order for a pair of humans to be comprehensible to the Hosts they must have an extremely strong empathic bond cultivated over a lifetime. Avice explains that since this system was refined, representatives to the Ariekei have been "doppels, cloned. It was the only viable way. They were bred in twos in the Ambassador-farm, tweaked to accentuate certain psychological qualities. … If you raised them right, taught them to think of themselves right, wired them with links, then they could speak Language, with close enough to one sentience that the Ariekei could understand it" (58). The novel's turmoil begins when Bremen sends a new Ambassador: two men, not clones or twins, who inexplicably achieve the same kind of empathy as the other, Embassytown-bred Ambassadors. They arrive at Embassytown never having spoken to Ariekei, and as soon as they do, things go awry.

Listening to the new Ambassador, called EzRa, the Hosts go into a trance state: they sway, spasm, develop repetitive tics, moan, or freeze, and only slowly come back to consciousness after the speech has ended (93-4). Soon they demand to hear EzRa speak again: the new Ambassador's speech is not only intoxicating, but highly addictive. A former Ambassador doppel named Bren explains the addiction to Avice, saying, "'[I]f they hear words they understand, they know are words, but it's fractured? Ambassadors speak with empathic unity. That's our job. What if that unity's there and not-there?' He waited. 'It's impossible, is what. Right there in its form. And that is intoxicating. And they *mainline* it. It's like a

hallucination, a there-not-there. A contradiction that gets them high'" (169, italics in original). As the addiction progresses, gradually spreading through the species into their non-sentient bioware, and from there into other Ariekei who haven't directly heard EzRa speak, the Hosts become a zombie horde of strung out junkies, increasingly desperate, violent, and unable to maintain their society and environment.

This second incarnation of Language is a viral consciousness that hooks its users together into a collective state of linguistic-biological need. This development points not only to the overlapping associations of language, virality, drugs, and gods—the Ariekei even refer to EzRa as "the god-drug" (194)—but also to the dangers of the fantasy of communicative empathy as a mode of direct, unmediated access. As one addicted Ariekei tells Avice, "*We want to decide what to hear, how to live, what to say, what to speak, how to mean, what to obey. We want Language to put to our use*," rather than to be at the mercy of every unmediated idea that enters their brains (262, italics in original). The coercive nature of such direct communication, largely ignored in *Mumbo Jumbo* and disconcerting in *Blood Music*, becomes downright horrific in *Embassytown*.

Although the mass addiction that consumes the Ariekei seems like a qualitative transformation of their language and consciousness, it is actually the logical extension of the way their language has always already operated. The direct link between minds central to Language reveals itself as a structural flaw when the mind being linked to is unstable. As soon as that link occurs, with no mediation between the sender and receiver of the destructive message, this species's communication network is thrown into turmoil from which no one can attain the distance necessary to opt out of EzRa's effects. Furthermore, when the mounting resentment between Ez and Ra reaches its tipping point and Ez murders Ra, the replacement Ambassador

EzCal has the same addictive effect on the Ariekei with the added horror of being able to issue commands the Hosts cannot disobey (254). Again, this development is not a break from the way the supposedly edenic Ariekei language functioned in the past, but is suggested to be the inevitable consequence of unmediated communication.

One small group of Ariekei are so desperate to cure themselves of this affliction that they mutilate themselves, cutting off their "fanwings" (which contain their hearing organs) in order to make themselves deaf. They undergo a painful detoxification, and give up their only method of communication, choosing pain and isolation over addiction. Then these Ariekei, whom the humans call the Absurd, begin killing humans and mutilating their fellow Hosts. It is by studying this group of rebels that Avice develops her plan to save the Ariekei. She muses:

> That final mutilation, by one Ariekes of another, was a recruitment. If the victim survived the shock and pain, it was made another soldier, on the enemy side. 'How does it receive orders?' I said, but no one could answer me. Perhaps there were no orders, only rage stripped of language. *Can they think? If they can't speak, can they think?* Language for Ariekei was speech and thought at once. *Wasn't it?* (272, italics in original)

Avice notices that the Absurds' attacks seem at least slightly coordinated, "galvanised by some signal we couldn't understand[, p]erhaps by an empathy to tides we couldn't sense, like birds circling and becoming one organism," suggesting that, despite what the Absurd believe, they are communicating (272). She realizes that they are doing so by gesturing with their "giftwings"—they are pointing. Ariekei Language has no relative pronouns because it recognizes no distance between signifier and signified, but by pointing, these deaf Ariekei are saying "that." Avice explains, "*[T]hat*ness faces every way: it's flexible because it's empty, a universal equivalent.

That always means *and not that other*, too. In their lonely silent way, the Absurd had made a semiotic revolution, and a new language" (295, italics in original). The separation between signifier and signified apparent in the act of pointing lets Avice know that the Hosts are capable of signifying, and that she can teach them how to do so without first making themselves deaf.

The next major transformation of Language occurs under Avice's guidance. Along with several other humans and a group of Ariekei looking for a cure, Avice travels through the countryside, hoping to meet and communicate with the Absurd. During their travels, she devises her plan. The first step is convincing the Ariekei she travels with that she is sentient and communicating, despite their lack of access to her mind. Bren tells her that Ambassadors have never wanted that point to be totally clear to the Ariekei. (A debate among the humans on Arieka is what they call the "Tallying Mystery": humans do not know if Hosts think Ambassadors are two beings speaking together or one being physically split in two—and consequently, if they think of singular humans as autonomous beings with an incomprehensible language, or as half-beings [96].) "'Make it clear,'" Avice replies. "'Ambassadors don't get to be the only real people any more'" (307). Once the Ariekei understand that Avice is sentient and communicating, "This was where it began to change" (308). Next, Avice pushes the Hosts incrementally toward signification until they suddenly, painfully catch on and begin to teach more Hosts themselves.

It is important to note that this transformation, like the first one from edenic immediacy into addiction, is not so much a paradigm shift as a turning inside out, an illumination of something that was already operational within Language. Avice's plan only works because the Hosts were already capable of signifying, so in a sense the element of Language Scile seeks to preserve was never really there to begin with. Avice and other humans have pointed out

contradictions and impossibilities in Language throughout the novel: how can Hosts think new thoughts if they can only refer to that which already exists (56)? How do numbers work for them (80)? How is it that these people incapable of dishonesty can only talk to humans who have convincingly lied about being two people sharing one mind (81)? And how can a language based in empathy succeed across species that cannot understand each other (181)? It is not that Language does not create the empathic bond the humans describe. It is that by creating such a bond, it is an impossible and unstable language.

Furthermore, this fall into mediation had been inevitable since the Ariekei's first contact with humans, and would have happened even without EzRa and Avice acting as catalysts. Avice achieves linguistic transformation by continuing the work begun by a small group of Hosts who had been on the verge of learning how to lie before chaos overtook the city. One of the Hosts' major forms of entertainment is the Festival of Lies. During these festivals—one of the "first gifts" the humans brought the Hosts upon first contact—Ambassadors lie in Language for the Ariekei's shock and titillation (83). When Hosts hear statements that they understand but know to be untrue, they hear them as "some giddying impossible, the said unthinkable," and it is for this reason that the Hosts find human lying entertaining (129). Hosts also compete in these festivals, trying to get as close as they can to lying. Some Hosts delight the crowds through trickery, speaking part of a true sentence only in a whisper to make the audible part untrue, and some manage to lie by speaking very slowly, "pretend-forget[ting]" each clause before speaking the next one (127, 128). One group of virtuoso liars seems to be working systematically at training themselves to lie by dropping the ends of sentences progressively, phrase by phrase, until they speak something false. A separate faction of Hosts and humans, led by Scile,

recognizes the threat to Language in what these liars are doing, and arranges the assassination of the best liar. These events recede into the background of the novel as more pressing issues take over, but Avice resurrects this group's work when she decides to move Language into a sign system. Scile and his faction are right about the corrupting influence of other languages: the Hosts were on the path to signification the moment they first heard a human lie.

Another consequence of the Ariekei's unique language is that they physically create similes and other linguistic tropes: the Hosts use humans, other species, and inanimate objects to stage bizarre actions and tableaux so that they can make references and comparisons to them, because in order to give words to a concept, that concept must first truly exist. Avice herself is a simile in Language, having been made to do something traumatic and incomprehensible as a child so that the Ariekei can compare things to her.[69] Bren helps Avice make the connection between lying and similes when he points out that Surl Tesh-echer, the assassinated liar, was fascinated with Avice and other humans instantiated in Language. Avice realizes that Surl Tesh-echer's method of lying, "eroding qualifying clauses until what was left was a sudden surprising lie" was nothing but "a sideshow," and that his real focus had been on similes. Lying, as Avice tells her human companions, "'means thinking of the world differently. Not referring: signifying'" (296). "'If similes do their job well enough,'" she continues, "'they turn into something else. We tell the truth best by becoming lies. … I don't want to be a simile anymore. … I want to be a metaphor'" (296). When Avice transforms the way Hosts use Language, she does so by comparing herself to everything around her, moving from simile to metaphor—she

[69] In Language, Avice is invoked as "*a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a long time*," shortened to "*a girl ate what was given her*" (26, italics in original). Avice thinks, "It was a crude rendering, of course, but it is I think more or less an expression intended to invoke surprise and irony, a kind of resentful fatalism" (26).

glows like the moon, she is the moon; she sleeps like the dead, she is dead—until "[o]ne by quick one the Ariekei shouted, then went silent. Their eyes stayed in. They swayed. No one spoke for a long time" (308). Avice teaches the Hosts to make metaphors—to tell lies that tell the truth—and a sign system is born. This shift was already underway before Avice's efforts, though. She simply propels the fall along when it becomes clear that Eden is killing its residents.

Embassytown, then, works through the same themes as *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music*: empathy and communication, immediacy and mediation, the language-virus-god-drug. Crucially, it does so in a story that remains attentive to questions of racial, political, and historical specificity. *Embassytown*'s colonial setting proves integral not only to the progression of the novel's plot but also to the development of its themes of empathy, communication, and embodiment. Bremen, it turns out, has sent the new Ambassador EzRa as a test balloon to see if non-cloned people can be successful in the role, because locally bred Ambassadors have become too powerful and Embassytown too self-sufficient. Bremen hopes to curtail nascent thoughts of independence and reassert its power over Embassytown, or at least to steer its path toward independence in such a way as to retain its functional power. Wyatt, Bremen's representative on Arieka throughout the novel, calls Bremen's plan "[c]ounterrevolution through language pedagogy and bureaucracy" (234). Against this colonial backdrop, access to communication is tied to power, and even empathy can be co-opted as a political tool.

Many of the scenes with Wyatt explore the triangulated colonial position of all humans on Ariekei, using his government job as a focal point. Avice likes Wyatt because, whether due to or in spite of his career, he is the character who seems most consistently aware of the humans' fraught position as colonists. After the addiction begins but before most humans have learned

what is happening, Avice is afraid that the Ariekei have halted business as usual because they have been offended by something the humans did. It is Wyatt who scolds her:

> "Oh, bullshit," Wyatt said. I blinked. "This isn't one of those stories, Avice. One moment of cack-handedness, Captain Cook offends the bloody locals, one slip of the tongue or misuse of sacred cutlery, and bang, he's on the grill. Do you ever think about how self-aggrandizing that stuff is? Oh, all those stories pretend to be *mea culpas* about cultural insensitivity, *oops, we said the wrong thing*, but they're really about how ridiculous natives overreact." (111)

Chastened, Avice seems to keep Wyatt's admonishment in mind through the rest of the story. When she travels out of the city in an attempt to communicate with the Absurd, she wryly compares her group to "mythical polar explorers, or the pioneers of homo diaspora," and at the close of the novel she reflects, "Scile in his visionary stupidity, trying to save the Ariekei, would have damned them: if they killed us, when the relief came it wouldn't forbear genociding them in return. I remember Scile's not from a colony when he fails to think of such things" (184, 344-5). These occasional reminders of the novel's colonial setting provide more than setting and plot devices. They point to the ways the specificities of embodied power structures affect and are affected by linguistic communication and empathy.

Avice's intervention in Language is also an intervention in politics, then, and one she makes purposefully, with all parties in mind. The transformation she provokes in a sense achieves Bremen's goal, making it possible for any pair of humans to speak with Hosts and be understood, as well as making it possible for Hosts to communicate through writing and to learn other languages. But if any two people can communicate with Hosts, Bremen cannot monopolize

that powerful position any more than Embassytown locals can. At the end of the novel, Ariekei can speak not only what they want, but to whom they want. In that sense, linguistic mediation acts as an equalizing force, carrying a political agenda of its own.

Embassytown also grapples with linguistic mediation's implications for embodiment: raced, gendered, sexualized, and variably permeable and mediating. At times a thorn in the side of linguistic immediacy, at times the medium through which language viruses must operate, its social and biological specificities mounting constant objections, the body, at last, must be reckoned with. The body problem of the information narrative—the lack of consideration paid to the specificities of embodiment when consciousness is conceptualized as information separable from its material substrates—plays out in *Embassytown* through the novel's frequent meditations on wholeness and duality, and Avice's related identities of queer, simile, and "immerser."

The theme of duality is most explicitly invoked through the Ambassadors, who enact the paradox that two beings can inhabit one body, or that one being can be split across two bodies. As revolution begins and Embassytown is threatened, one of the signs of the descent of civilization is that more and more doppels (the individual members comprising Ambassadors) begin to commit suicide, leaving their surviving partners feeling as though they've lost half of themselves. As with the permutations of Language, however, what seems to be a new problem for this society is actually an ongoing, if underground, crisis: as Avice discovers, failed and "cleaved" Ambassadors have always been plentiful but hidden away in rest homes. One of the main characters throughout the final sections of the book is the cleaved Ambassador Bren, formerly part of the Ambassador BrenDan. As a result of Dan's death, Bren lives the rest of his life feeling incomplete. His name is technically Bren~~Dan~~, but as he tells Avice, "'You can't say

my name. You might spell it, but you can't say it. But then I can't say my name either. *Bren* is as good as any of us can do. *It*…' He looked at the Host, which nodded gravely. 'Now, it can say my name. But that's no good: it and I can't speak anymore'" (15, ellipses and italics in original).

Bren's presence points not only to the fact that this society has never been as unified and functional as it has appeared, but also to the ways characters experience their identities through their places in language. Another way this point is highlighted is through the way Ambassadors' names are rendered in writing and speech. To take the example of an Ambassador who rises to a position of leadership as the Embassy seeks to manage the chaos, their name is Mag/Da, with both syllables spoken simultaneously in Language, one by each mouth. It is written in Language like a numerical fraction, with Mag positioned over a horizontal line and Da under it, but since Language has no written form, this notation is a human approximation. When written or spoken in Anglo-Ubiq, their name is written MagDa and spoken sequentially from left to right. Therefore, when spoken by Hosts, Mag and Da are equal parts of the Ambassador they comprise, but when written or spoken by humans, Mag always comes first or on top. Human language will not allow—does not have a mechanism for representing—the simultaneity that would reproduce and reinforce these doppels' supposedly equal relationship. This implicit hierarchy is something Avice immediately grasps when she meets a rebel Ambassador working with the underground, two doppels who have reversed their names and go by YlSib. Avice reflects, "I knew as [Bren] said it that they'd once been Ambassador SibYl, and that this recomposition was part of their rebellion. … I was staring into something opened up. Fractures, renegades, guerrilla Ambassadors, unquiet cleaved" (208).

Avice's status as a simile is another way *Embassytown* explores the interconnections among identity, language, and embodiment. Avice's role "in Language," a role various other humans call an honor, and about which some express jealousy, implicitly authorizes the action she takes that alters Language. Her body is part of Language and is necessary to it—"*I do not know*," one Host says, "*how I did without her, how I thought what I needed to think*" (96)—and it is by using her body to act out similes and metaphors that she shows the Hosts how to signify. Avice's relationship to her body is also emphasized when she is made to perform her simile. "I know now to call what I did then disassociating," she narrates, "I watched it all, myself included" (25). Avice's embodied interactions with Language are foregrounded throughout the novel, and the shift of Language from immediacy to mediation comes across less as a transcendence or dismissal of the body than as a longed-for distance, the ability for Avice and the Hosts to determine for themselves what their bodies do in relation to Language.

Avice's body is also non-normative, her influence on Language a queering one. We learn very soon after meeting Avice that she is romantically and sexually involved with women and men, and that she tends to have more than one partner at a time (5). In science fiction settings, same-sex relationships do not have to be positioned as queer in the sense of being non-normative, but *Embassytown* makes a point of noting that Avice's sexuality is not sanctioned by her home society. Scile says it's "quaint" that same-sex relationships are illicit on Arieka and asks if people know that Avice was once married to a woman. She replies, "'I've been to the out, my love. … I can do anything I bloody want'" (69). Avice's sexuality is therefore explicitly tied to another of her non-normative identities, that of an interstellar traveler.

In this novel, extremely rapid travel between planets occurs in "the immer." As Avice explains, "The immer's reaches don't correspond at all to the dimensions of the manchmal, this space where we live. The best we can do is say that the immer *underlies* or *overlies*, *infuses*, is a *foundation*, is *langue* of which our actuality is *parole*, and so on" (31). Three universes are known to have existed, "[b]ut below all that, or around it, or whatever, there's only ever been one immer'" (34).[70] Few people can travel through the immer easily; most have to be sedated. The few who have or learn an affinity for it, including Avice, tend to hold positions that require a great deal of interstellar travel. Avice's identity as an immerser connects to her queerness as well as her status as a simile; in all three cases, Avice is non-normative, positioned as an outsider by dint of her bodily practices and talents. As with her sexuality and her role in Language, despite being an outsider of sorts, Avice uses her position as an immerser to move across multiple social and physical settings, to gain access she would not otherwise have, and to bend the rules around her. It is the combination of her non-normative positions, expressed through embodied practices and significations, that uniquely enables her to fulfill her role as the snake in this story's garden.

Embassytown's themes of non-normative identity, language, embodiment, and duality coalesce in Avice's sexual relationships with Ambassadors. Before her marriage with Scile becomes estranged, she begins dating CalVin, and she and Scile giggle over whether having sex with an Ambassador should be thought of as a threesome, and whether Cal and Vin together is "homosex" or masturbation (76). Sexuality is tied to the fundamental question of how many people an Ambassador is, then, and it is Avice's sexuality that facilitates these philosophical discussions within the text. (Later Avice also has a sexual relationship with Bren, raising implicit

[70] Two places might be located much closer together in the immer than they are in manchmal space, and Arieka is strategically important to Bremen because although it is geographically isolated in everyday space, it is situated in a prime location in the immer.

questions of whether that sex should be thought of as occurring between two people or one and a half people.) These relationships also tie the novel's thematic focuses on queer sexuality, embodiment, and duality to Language. Before their breakup, CalVin and Avice fight over her spending time with her fellow similes and she tells them, "'You speak Language. I am it'" (98). Another simile later tells Avice that very few Ambassadors are tropes because "'It makes them feel vulnerable—they like speaking Language, not being it" (106). Embodiment within Language is indeed a vulnerable condition, but is also a powerful one, as Avice proves.

Through its explorations of embodiment's relationship to language, *Embassytown* reworks metaphors of virality, reversing the associations of virus and cure from the way they operate in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music*. Typically the comparison of language to a virus suggests that a "heathy" state outside of language is possible and desirable, that the escape from language seemingly promised by empathy is a cure. The spread of the Host addiction and the transformation of Language into a sign system are both repeatedly called viral and infectious, and characters in both situations despair that there might not be any "cure." The original immediacy of Language facilitated by empathy only seems a healthy state, however. If language is a virus, all permutations of Language are viral, whether they mediate or open direct empathic links between minds. After Language's final evolution, a Host proclaims to others he seeks to transform, "We were grown into Language. … Language spoke us. … You've never spoken before. You will" (335). Immediate, empathic Language is experienced by Ariekei as limiting and coercive, a sickness the Hosts want to heal even before their addiction begins.

Empathy emerges in this novel not merely as the elusive goal of language without mediation, as it appears in the first descriptions of Language, but as an embodied (and therefore

mediated and mediating) force co-present and co-constitutive with linguistic communication. Human communication with the Ariekei has been possible all along because certain pairs of people have achieved extraordinary levels of empathy in spite of their signifying human language; they will continue to be able to achieve empathy after Language's evolution. In one sense nothing is lost in Language's transformation because the thing feared lost was not really there to begin with. In another sense nothing is lost because the thing feared lost continues in a different form. Empathy, like immer to everyday space, is the stuff that overlays, underpins, flows through, and enables language. Like *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music*, *Embassytown* rejects immediacy in favor of embodied and textual mediation. But unlike *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music*, *Embassytown* positions that rejection not as an inevitable failure or retreat from an unattainable goal, but as an embrace of something better.

How to Do Things With Form

Mumbo Jumbo, *Blood Music*, and *Embassytown*, while emerging out of very different historical contexts and generic conventions, share some striking confluences beyond their thematic engagements with the language-virus. Perhaps necessarily, because they are stories about language, all three confront the linguistic challenges of telling a language-virus story, beginning with narrative perspective. They all evince a search for appropriate and evocative strategies for representing the desire to be a *we* instead of an *I*, and for working through the failures and fulfillments of that desire. *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music* seem most comfortable with the distance and position of a third person narrator that zooms in and out, sometimes attaching itself to particular characters and sometimes imperfectly occupying a view from nowhere. In *Mumbo*

Jumbo the goal seems to be a dissemination of storytelling authority to a wide variety of voices, while *Blood Music* works toward crafting the truly collective voice of the noosphere. Both novels' narrative voices reveal what could be considered flaws in light of these goals, however: Ishmael Reed's insertions of himself into his novel subvert the project of distributing authority, and *Blood Music*'s collective voice is a self-contradiction when there is no one left for it to talk to. *Embassytown*'s consistent first person voice does raise questions—who is Avice's assumed audience, for one—but it seems the simplest and perhaps most appropriate way to tell a story of virally empathic consciousness: from one situated, self-aware position. The empathic collective Avice (and readers) observe from the outside is a red herring; the one she (and we) come to understand through her perspective is the one to which she has belonged all along, as a participant within and shaper of language.

Beyond narrative perspective, all three of these books also draw attention to their use of novelistic tropes and formal experimentation. Much of the evocative language use in *Embassytown* occurs in its embodiment of similes, and in its representations of Language. Renderings of Ambassadors' names in English (or Anglo-Ubiq) cannot help but create hierarchies and suggest a way of understanding Ambassadors as fractions: each doppel is a numerator or denominator depending whether their half of the name comes above or below the horizontal line, and together they mean something less than they would apart. Including the possibility of an alien language that not only allows for but requires polyvocality and simultaneity reveals the limits of univocal and linear human languages.

Embassytown consistently includes moments of self-awareness on Avice's part as well. The story progresses in split time, in alternating chapters labeled "Formerly" and "Latterday"

that tell the necessary backstory separate from the events of the present-day; when the "Formerly" story catches up with the beginning of the "Latterday" story, Avice tells us, "Everything after this was latterday, and it's the only story remaining" (162). Throughout the novel Avice is conscious of the fact that she is telling—and living within—a story. She emphasizes the plotting and retelling of her life when she reports, "I needed to be alone for whatever would happen. I knew that something would as certainly as if this were a last chapter" (155); when she muses "A promise fulfilled may be a classic moment, but prophecies mean anticlimax. How much more awesome was an unexpected salvation?" (244); and even more directly, when Bren asks her what her plan is, and she narrates, "I told him. Revelation was spoiled for him, but I can retain it here, for you" (285).

As she self-consciously tells her story, Avice is aware of the compromises and inaccuracies that inevitably get solidified into dominant narratives of historical events. She admits, "[I]t's unfair to insinuate that all Hosts cared about was Language, but I can't fail to do so. This is a true story I'm telling, but I am telling it, and that entails certain things" (129). She also "admit[s] defeat," explaining, "I've been trying to present these events with a structure. I simply don't know how everything happened. Perhaps because I didn't pay proper attention, perhaps because it wasn't a narrative, but for whatever reasons, it doesn't want to be what I want to make it" (145). While *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music* are perhaps more obviously formally experimental books, including parodic paratextual material and fractured poetry respectively, *Embassytown*'s self-aware narrator points to similar thematic concerns: how history gets shaped in the telling and by whom, and how to communicate with and about the alien other. *Embassytown* also makes it clear that Avice is not the only storyteller at work in this narrative.

One of the things she finds uncomfortable about spending time with another simile is the way he relates the "terrible things done to enLanguage him": the way he "modulated his voice and timed his delivery and turned it, true as it was, into a story" (107). Avice also remarks that when Scile kills Cal he "[brings] no narrative to a conclusion," and her hatred of Ez comes through in her bitter pronouncement, "I didn't give a shit about his story" (342, 328). Just as in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Blood Music*, a story about the language-virus necessitates the inclusion of multiple voices telling multiple stories.

In these novels, the immediately apparent typographical oddities (the use of bold, italics, all caps, strikethrough, asterisks, line breaks, numerals and fractions) work in concert with the novels' narrative innovations. The formatting and narration evince hypermediation and revisions of official textuality and historical narratives. These moments of self-referentiality represent attempts include a multitude of perspectives and evacuate the singular narrative voice. They register a friction between novelistic form and content in stories about a transcendence of language that could make those very forms obsolete. This tension between form and content is reminiscent of the tensions within the concept of empathy itself, between its definition as an aesthetic encounter with art and its function as an affective and political connection with other subjects. Although arguably the odd one out in the triad of empathies I have developed—the least connected to the overall cultural sense of *empathy* that includes aesthetic, philosophical, political, emotional, and neurobiological components—communicative empathy may therefore shed some light on readerly and affective empathies through its expressions in science fiction.

Conclusion: Reading Ruptures

In order to articulate the relationships across the three kinds of empathy this project has explored, it is now time to recombine them and say a few words about fruitful connections across categorical lines. As should be clear, all three empathies are intimately connected to *reading*: what I have called *readerly empathy* names an aesthetic encounter with literature; *affective empathy* has often been assumed to be amplified through reading; and *communicative empathy*, because it is thought to be found least in the "real world" is most accessible through the genre of science fiction, where it is a commonly used trope. Second, all three empathies constitute kinds of *ruptures*, revealing empathy's complex relationships with embodiment and permeabilities as it makes the painful shift from a humanist concept to a posthumanist one.

Digging into the specific links between the three aspects of empathy, readerly and affective empathies are often discussed as the same thing, or with the assumption that one automatically leads to the other. I argue instead that readerly empathy often facilitates relationships of affective empathy, but does not have to. Entanglement with a text and its characters can occur without sympathy for and identification with those characters (as in the case of *Lolita*), and affective empathy can even occur without the entanglement of readerly empathy, as it does for some players of *Heavy Rain*. In that case, the narrative perspectives jar with other elements of the game, potentially taking players out of the in-between aesthetic space of entanglement even as they may attach affective empathy to one or more of the protagonists, as I did to Madison.

Furthermore, the relationship between readerly and affective empathies, when it is present, is not automatically a positive one, leading to more altruistic attitudes and behaviors, as

is sometimes assumed or claimed. The examples of the first chapter's texts illustrate this point: if our readerly empathy with *Fledgling*, established through Shori as an entry point, causes us to feel affective empathy for her and therefore makes us more likely to excuse and justify her potential sexual assaults, readerly empathy has succeeded in facilitated affective empathy but their combination has not led anywhere politically responsible or altruistic. The second chapter's texts' warnings about projection in affective empathy can be applied back to the texts of chapter one: projecting ourselves into characters in ways that don't allow us to see the whole picture is dangerous. The problems of projection can be seen especially in the example of over-investing in Ethan at Madison's expense while playing *Heavy Rain*, but they are also apparent in the work of some *Garden* critics who cannot consider certain interpretations of Catherine's actions because they seem incompatible with a biographical reading of David as a stand-in for Hemingway.

Communicative empathy, although it seems perhaps the least connected to the other empathies (because it is both the least "real" and the least theorized), is actually quite closely tied to both readerly and affective empathies, and including this science fiction trope in the conversation illuminates important qualities in them. Especially when we're talking about all three empathies in a literary context, it doesn't matter that it's less "real" than the other two, if that's an objection to which we subscribe. If a mind-meld for transmitting affect extra-discursively is impossible in the "real world," that limitation would still make the trope a fictional extension of everyday forms of empathy and thus derived from them and expressing something about them in its literary experiments.

The paradoxes and failures of language in the first chapter find new expression in the science fictional texts of chapter three: in *Blood Music* the destabilization of the individual

subject suggested in *Fledgling* (also a science fictional novel, I might add) is so thorough that I find myself incapable of writing about it accurately. In contrasting the noosphere to the humans outside it I keep making reference to the individual subject even as I argue that *Blood Music* destabilizes the very premise of an "individual" subject. My own difficulties with language regarding this novel are perhaps reflections of the linguistic grasping within *Blood Music* itself, as the text seeks ways to render nonlinguistic communication in words, for those of us who still need them. Similarly, David's desire to say no and have it mean yes in *Garden* is something that might be possible for aliens who speak with two mouths, as in *Embassytown*. At the end of the novel, Avice asks one of the Hosts if it regrets having learned to lie and it replies, "I regret nothing/I regret," each statement spoken simultaneously by one mouth. Avice thinks, "A performance perhaps, but I envy that precision" (343).

The texts of chapter three facilitate a consideration of perspective within linguistic communication as one of empathy's central challenges. In lending their metaphors to literary stories of group consciousness, posthuman evolution, and the rapid and transformative dissemination of ideas, viruses point to and complicate the politics of readerly perspective, authority, and access, politics which adhere in linguistic communication more broadly speaking as well. This challenge overlaps quite a bit with the issues of consent and projection taken up in chapters one and two, but language-virus stories confront the specifically literary difficulties of empathy in perhaps more obvious or daring ways, as the formal and narrative experimentation of these texts demonstrate. If formal innovation is necessary to demonstrate how communicative empathy operates with and in language in chapter three's texts, maybe the formal innovations of chapter two's texts—especially *The Salt Roads*, but also *Surfacing* to some extent—show us the

mechanisms at work behind affective empathy cultivated through literature. *The Salt Roads* emphasizes its interventions into the dominant historical narrative of St. Mary of Egypt, a project Hopkinson has discussed in terms of humanizing her. If we reading *Surfacing* as a hybrid novel combining modernist and postmodern characteristics, as Kokotailo does, we can see how the form of the text reflects the shift in the subject as it is understood within those paradigms. This thematic-formal connection demonstrates not only that affective empathy must adapt to such a transition, but how it might do so.

Furthermore, communicative empathy is the one of the three that most emphasizes bodies, and through its ties to affective and readerly empathies, it encourages us to read embodiment back into those uses of the word. There exist any number of literary texts that thematize or explicitly try to cultivate affective empathy, and we could potentially explore the political challenges of readerly empathy with any unreliable narrator or ambiguous text—these aspects of empathy could potentially be explored using texts that don't emphasize issues of embodiment. Communicative empathy, on the other hand, seems to necessitate sustained attention to bodies within the plot, characters, and themes of the texts themselves. In addition to the polymorphous perversity of Jes Grew Carriers, the transformation of (post)human bodies by the noosphere, and the specificities of Host anatomy that work in tandem with their empathic language, the other communicative empathy texts I have mentioned in passing also engage embodiment in ways deeply tied to their uses of empathy. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it is communicative empathy that finally allows the main Terran character, Genly, to fully understand and accept the sex/gender system of the alien species he visits. In *Neuromancer*, Case's fraught relationship with his own body is never more apparent than when he views himself through

Molly's eyes, using her body as a prosthesis. And in the *Parable* books, Butler deconstructs easy assumptions about empathy's links to altruism and community precisely by making empathy a physically embodied phenomenon rather than an emotional-cognitive one. Communicative empathy, as the most science fictional of the three empathies considered, often encourages us to keep bodies part of the conversation by staging encounters that explicitly try to shed the body and thereby show the impossibility of doing so. For my treatments of readerly and affective empathies, I purposely chose texts centered on feminized bodily experiences, because by exploring and extending the physical permeabilities of these experiences, these texts perform a version of the science fictional move of biologization. Empathy is not simply an intersubjective experience; it is a physical and affective experience of permeability made material by and tied to the experiences of sexual intimacy and pregnancy staged in the texts.

Finally, because communicative empathy does not presume a unidirectional model of transmission and reception, it points back at reading itself as a multidirectional rupture where interpretation (political, affective, and aesthetic as well as semantic) occurs in the space between texts and readers. The self-conscious narrative and formal experimentation seen in chapter three's texts can also be found in different manifestations in the texts of the first two chapters, where characters function as stand-ins for readers, and shifts in narrative perspective self-consciously direct our affective attachments. These strategies all have the effect of self-awareness on the part of readers. These texts teach us not only why to pay attention to our reading processes of consent, projection, and perspective, but also what it looks like and feels like to practice empathy. When we empathize, whether with fiction or in the "real world," we are shaping narratives, choosing forms, assigning imperfect language, selectively projecting, giving

and taking consent, shifting perspectives, and assuming that these things we call empathy are both impossible and necessary.

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