

FOREIGN BODIES AND ANTI-BODIES: QUEER TRANSFORMATIVITY
IN POST-WORLD WAR II LITERATURE AND FILM

By

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

English

August, 2008

Nashville, Tennessee

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For Jeremy, who had a doctorate in poetry but was, more importantly, a poet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the help of a graduate fellowship from the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. Mona Frederick, Galyn Martin, and Sarah Nobles from the Center provided our group of fellows with tremendous professional support and the space to wrestle with our messy ideas. My fellow fellows – Mike Callaghan, Josh Epstein, Megan Moran, George Sanders, David Solodkow, and Heather Talley – have been invaluable eyes and ears when it comes to this project.

Carolyn Dever and Paul Young co-directed this dissertation, Dana Nelson was its secondary reader, and Judith Halberstam was its outside reader. I could have asked for an “easier” committee, but I could not have asked for a better one. I thank them all for their keen and engaged criticism.

At Vanderbilt, I have been lucky enough to learn under a host of brilliant teachers and mentors, including Jay Clayton – whose willingness to let me sit in on an independent study on narratology was crucial to this project – Lynn Enterline, Leah Marcus, Deak Nabers, and John Sloop of Communication Studies. I have been inspired and encouraged by Teresa Goddu of American Studies every step of the way. The Women’s and Gender Studies Program and the Center for Teaching – and Allison Pingree and Patricia Armstrong in particular – have challenged me to become a more rigorous and well-rounded scholar. I am also indebted to Donna Caplan, Janis May, and the entire support staff of the English Department, for always smoothing out the paperwork wrinkles.

I have also had a fabulous group of colleagues-cum-friends at Vanderbilt, from the members of the Queer Theory Reading Group – Donald Jellerson and Sarah Kersh in particular – to my cohort – including Ben Graydon and Christian Long. Their willingness to read

my work, and to kvetch with me over grad school life, has been invaluable. Gayle Parrott of Women's and Gender Studies has been a beloved lunch date throughout my years here. Virginia Allison, Beau Baca, Natalie Cisneros, Will Funk, Katherine Fusco, Sarah Hansen, Justin Haynes, John Morrell, Brian Rejack, TC Ulman, and Jane Wanninger have been my beloved partners in petty crime while living in Nashville. While finishing this dissertation was a terribly exciting prospect, the fact that it meant I'd eventually see these people less was anything but.

My parents, Mike and Cecilia, have supported me in my graduate career in countless ways. Their enthusiastic visits to Nashville, all the way from Southern California, always renew my appreciation for the life I've had here.

Philip Seymour would be one of my best friends if he were not my brother. But good thing he is, or I would have no one with whom to gorge myself on Hitchcock, *The Gilmore Girls*, and fake meatstuffs during the holidays.

Friends from far and away have sustained me throughout grad school with letters, emails, CD mixes, visits, hostings, and phone calls. My love to Julie Beauregard, Darin DeWitt, Joya Golden, Vilija Joyce, Michelle Horejs, Nathan Ihara, Audra Kudirka, Jeff Morse, Faye Ziegeweid, and my finest dearest Christine Bolghand.

I will never end marveling at my fortune in knowing Jeff Menne. He should be thanked for keeping me in T. Rex tunes throughout the years, for remaining lovely in the face of difficulty, and for the root beer.

While I was in the midst of writing this dissertation, my dear friend Jeremy Lespi – poet, teacher, troublemaker, and Alabaman Francophile – passed away. I could never thank him enough for bringing his unmatched drollness, evil wit, and gentle kindness into my life. This work is dedicated to his memory.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction: Framing Bodily Change

“Queer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out, and displays its supports exoskeletally.” – Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*

“We live in a moment of vigorous suspicion about naturalized categories of bodies. However ... it is important to note that the denaturalization of one identity category is often achieved through a renaturalization of another category. Current contestations over race, gender, and sexuality enact a productive search for new language and models of subjectivity. At the same time, the affirmative potential of these debates may be at risk if the analogies that enable that denaturalization are left uninterrogated.” – Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*

“The defining feature of the modern is its narrative structuring of time as the progressive realization of an ideal of human emancipation. ... Postmodernity signals the dissolution of such a unilinear narrative of history with its corollary notions of progress and overcoming ... Yet ... the elevation of the postmodern over the modern reproduces precisely that same gesture of historical overcoming.” – Rita Felski, “Fin de Siecle, Fin du Sexe”

In Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body* (1992), the unsexed, ambiguously-gendered, homodiegetic narrator ruminates on normative social life: “Is that what I want? The model family, two plus two in an easy home assembly kit[?]. I don’t want a model, I want the full-scale original. I don’t want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new” (108). Just eight pages after these musings, we encounter the same pondering, reflective tone, but this time in a description of the cancer of the blood spreading through the narrator’s beloved:

In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself. Her faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit ... they

are swelling with pride ... Here they come, hurtling through the bloodstream trying to pick a fight. There's no-one to fight but you Louise. You're the foreign body now. (116)

Written's withholding of basic somatic information about its narrator¹ makes all the more prominent the novel's inclusion of institutional and social discourses about the body – from the interpolation of contemporary medical textbook passages to the narrator's hyperbolic romantic blazons about the female form.² *Written* indicates that the various means available for grasping the body are laden with investments and agendas – exemplified in these quasi-humorous descriptions of cells as “bandits,” or as having “pride;” the use of the colloquial rebuke of “making too much of [oneself]” to describe what contemporary society considers to be the random, non-punitive experience of cancer;³ and the collision of “impartial” scientific knowledge and moralizing in the phrase “faithful biology” – a doubly ironic phrase, insofar as Louise is committing adultery with the narrator. In fact, these passages invoke the long history in which social pathology and medical pathology intertwine; the narrator (re)produces too little, while Louise produces too much. Cancer begins to look just as queer as non-reproductivity. Such constructions might make us wonder if it is possible any longer, if it ever was, to apprehend the body in its “real” materiality; as the narrator says to a friend after searching for the beloved after a long estrangement, “I couldn't find her. It's as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?”

In such metatextual moments, not to mention in its self-conscious title, *Written on the Body* trains our eye on the body as text, and as known through texts – and, further, it collapses the divide between “fictional” and “non-fictional” access to the body. It plays with classical narrative conventions on the level of content and as regards corporeality: a “fragmented, chapterless, multi-tensed novel” (Miner 21), it never addresses the sex or gender of its narrator,

frustrating the critic and/or reader who expects revelation and closure at the novel's end – and who equates corporeal data with “meaning.”⁴ Likewise, *Written* never tells us what happens to the dying beloved, even prompting us to question if Louise, if she *did* actually exist within the diegesis, was ever ill at all.

So what to make of the narrator's insistence on “making something entirely new?” Might the narrator be playing with the possibility of escaping textuality and discursivity altogether, and inventing new ways of talking about, looking at, and loving the body, or being embodied? When we consider several elements, this seems unlikely: throughout *Written*, the narrator uses the same syntactical structure of disavowal and avowal over and over, with some small variation: “I don't want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new” (108); “I don't want to be fated, I want to choose” (91); “I don't want to be your sport ... I want the hoop around our hearts to be a guide” (88). The structure of disavowal-avowal suggests that the desire cited is always conditioned by a *negative* desire; “making something entirely new” is an impossible prospect, premised as it is on something *old*. Moreover, the form this desire takes (language), also, ironically, keeps the speaker from the speaker's own desires: in stating that one does not want to reproduce, one calls upon language – that which predetermines us, that which is laden with cultural sediment, that which reproduces the social order. “I love you is always a quotation,” the narrator reminds us on the very first page (9).

We might therefore surmise that the novel trains its eye on something more precise than non-narrativity or non-discursivity. *Written*'s counternarrative impulses might not offer the obliteration of, or even a full alternative to, narrative – especially in that it plays off of literary conventions. And it certainly leaves us with no idea of how we “really should” talk about, look, or love the body, or be embodied. But one of the narrator's reminiscences offers us a clue for

understanding the work of such a novel:

At school, in biology I was told the following [were the characteristics of living things]: Excretion, growth, irritability, locomotion, nutrition, reproduction, and respiration. This does not seem like a very lively list to me. If that's all there is to a living thing I may as well be dead. What of that other characteristic prevalent in human living things, the longing to be loved? No, it doesn't come under the heading Reproduction. I have no desire to reproduce but I still seek out love. (108)

In citing the discourses through which we articulate corporeality, in depicting a non-gendered speaking subject, and, finally, in posing this simple want, the text raises the question of the modern Western criteria that constitute “the human.” The desire to “make something entirely new,” then, might mean shifting us away from those criteria and, in turn, revealing them – forcing the reader to ask just how “growth” and “reproduction,” and not love, could still stand as the marks of the human in a self-consciously postmodern moment.

Premises

Written on the Body's musings are clearly informed by post-structuralism, and feminist poststructuralist work in particular – skeptical as it is of claims about essential being, and selves that preexist discourse. I draw on this same work here, maintaining both that “real” bodies are themselves representations, and that representations determine how we see “real bodies.” This project's scrutiny of represented bodies should therefore not be misunderstood as either a compensation for looking at “real bodies,” or as an aping of material analyses. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler challenges us to consider how “the production of texts can be one way of [re]configuring what will count as the world” (19, brackets mine). While one may be interested in a particular text *as a text*, it is not fully divisible from the terms by which people

understand “real” lives, or from the terms by which people may want to change those understandings. Moreover, as Butler continues, “because texts do not reflect the entirety of their authors or their worlds, they enter a field of reading as partial provocations, not only requiring a set of prior texts in order to gain legibility, but – at best – initiating a set of appropriations and criticisms that call into question their fundamental premises” (19). Using Butler’s argument as a springboard, I take two particular theoretical paths in this project: thinking of the films, novels, and other narratives I read as texts, *and* thinking of bodies themselves as texts. Thus, this project claims that the reception of particular bodies also depends on “sets of prior texts” – the bodies that have been previously represented, and *made representable*, in public culture through various means and for various reasons.

I examine a selection of literary and filmic texts produced between 1946 and 1995, a period I will refer to here as late modernism – stretching across, as it does, both the “post-modernist” post-war period, and “postmodernism.” (Later in this chapter, I offer a fuller discussion of this periodization, and the problem of periodization itself). I show how, in offering instances of bodily transformativity that we might term “queer,” these texts expose, rework, and offer alternatives to the epistemological frames which govern our understandings of bodies at large. More specifically, these texts make formal and theoretical critiques of dominant narrative form,⁵ and of normative vision – indicating that mainstream post/modern Western culture largely grasps the body not through biological data, but through the systems that govern textual comprehension. Those systems, dominant narrative form and normative vision, offer readers and viewers a sense of “revelation,” “enlightenment,” “improvement,” and/or “growth” as they process texts – and, thereby, they train individuals into the shared values of culture. What counts as “success” for a body depends on how we recognize “improvement,” just as what counts as

“the truth” for a body depends on how we envision “revelation.” Thus, while this project draws on my expertise as a reader of twentieth-century literature and film, its findings have great import for the wider arenas of contemporary theory and cultural studies – which include queer theory, feminist theory, transgender studies, postmodern studies,⁶ and narrative theory.

The Argument

The bodily experiences treated in my archive are diverse on the levels of sex, gender, age, race, class, and sexuality. They range from the AIDS-related decline of white, privileged adult bodies; to the “organic” second puberties of Third World transgendered individuals; to white female adolescences that do not portend adulthood. Taken together, the works that depict these experiences represent a tendency in late modernist literary and filmic production, one that takes up bodily transformativity as a site for exploring the dominant standards that shape what we typically – statically and broadly – term “the body,” and for in turn prompting the following set of questions: What role do *the vicissitudes of the body itself* – and not its practices, desires, or even its appearance – play in invoking “queerness” in this late modernist period? What allows a representation of bodily change, or of bodily stasis, to challenge the modern limits of the human? And what forms of tradition and knowledge do such challenges speak to?

While, as I have indicated, these works are distinguished on the highest level by how they indicate that classical narrative form and normative vision overdetermine understandings of the body, they bring an unprecedented focus to this relationship in several ways. First and foremost, they show how these paradigms inform and are further perpetuated by developmentalism – the turn-of-the-century discourse of human growth that arose at the very same time that homosexuality *as a distinct, innate identity* was being consolidated – just two processes to which scientification contributed greatly.⁷ The developmental discourse posits as universal,

transhistorical, and inevitable human processes including puberty, adolescence, and reproductivity. The works I treat here pointedly take developmentalism as a plot, through which events such as puberty, adolescence, and reproductivity are *plotted* – effecting in turn either the validation or pathologization of bodies that conform to or run afoul of this plot. I thus trace both developmentalism’s late modernist life, and how literature and film have been formulated in response to, and *formulated queer responses to*, this paradigm.

While these texts’ engagement with modern developmentalism shows that it deeply pervades even the so-called postmodern period, milieu is not all that distinguishes their engagement; whereas other literary and filmic works address developmentalism and its effects thematically – if they address them at all – my archive does so metatextually, not just citing but playing with narrative and visual norms. These texts insist that the classical standards that inform Western views of the body must be dealt with directly – meaning not just “specifically,” but “formally” as well. Thereby, another unique feature of this archive becomes clear. Works from other periods, as well as from within the late modernist period, can be read as queer for the ways in which they depict strange desires and strange affiliations; conversely, works from other periods, as well as from within the late modernist period, can be read as innovative for the ways that they play with literary form, subvert readerly expectations, or shift viewers from normative foci. But the works in my archive cannot be reduced to either the formally queer or the thematically queer; their formal innovations have queer effects, and their queerness is tightly tied to their formal innovations – not least of all because of how, as I explore through my analyses, traditional formalism functions as a central technology of heteronormativity. What all of these chapters reveal together, then, is the queer streak of late modernist literature and film – one that does not just take on heteronormativity at large, but zeroes in on the heteronormative power of

developmentalist schema, and does so by adjusting the narrative/visual standards that inform them.

This project provides in-depth readings of exemplary works of this kind, considering how each troubles the progressive schema of developmentalism through literary or filmic techniques, thus challenging the persistent modern limits of “the human.” To take two examples, it is not simply that Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) depicts adolescents being “left to their own devices,” or that Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) shows that transgender persons seek to decide their own fates; these works indicate through form and rhetoric just how and why adolescents are apprehended in a particular manner, and just how cultural pressures corral the trans person under the rubric of Western medicine. In Chapter 2, I argue that the techniques employed in *The Member of the Wedding* create an adolescent character whose body does not actually portend adulthood. In “violating” the progressive schema of human development, McCullers necessarily violates narrative norms as well – not dispensing with narrative altogether, but showing how it structures our understanding of bodies in often-oppressive ways. To paraphrase *Written on the Body*’s narrator, then, it is not that such authors (want) to “make something entirely new” narratively speaking, but that their narrative innovations make something new, culturally speaking – such as, in the case of *Member*, the non-futurist adolescent. Chapter 3’s consideration of transgendered life narratives shows how these texts queer the developmental narrative by positing the concept of a second puberty – a body with two genders in one lifetime; a recursive rather than progressive body. “Deforming” the developmental schema in these ways, I argue, leads us to consider the normative shape that it lends to life stories. Such “deformations” are also inextricable from the endeavor of queering temporality itself – critiquing the racist, colonialist, and capitalist underpinnings of our concept

of modern time, with its insistence on progress and overcoming. To wit: the postcolonial articulations of transgenderism that I also consider in Chapter 3 offer us a vision of trans life that problematizes Western interventionism and the medical complex – paradigms that bank heavily on “progress” and “overcoming.”

A Word on “Queer,” A Word on “Transformativity”

While “queer” is one of the most slippery and contested terms in contemporary theory, I employ it very specifically in this project. I follow Annamarie Jagose’s claim that

queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender[,] and sexual desire [sexuality]. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on ‘mismatches’ between sex, gender, and desire. (3)

The texts that I deal with, and the instances of transformativity that they present, all highlight the instability among sex, gender, and sexuality. They also make clear the means through which white, properly-gendered, reproductive heterosexuality is produced as the norm – as the “origin” of the predominant cultural model rather than one of that model’s ideological effects. Thus, I build on Jagose’s definition by insisting that the “queer” also encompasses that which exposes the systems that stage “coherency” in the first place, and by insisting that those systems are deeply invested in racial purity and reproductivity, among other standards.

While the critical and oppositional energies of “queer” animate my texts, and my own analyses, I am wary of establishing the term as a uniformly radical one. As Sharon Marcus asserts, “queer theory often accentuates the subversive dimensions of lesbian, gay, and transgender acts and identities” (13), ignoring how those acts and identities can be acknowledged

by, and even collude with, dominant culture.⁸ Thus, my analyses contribute to queer theoretical discourse, and cultural studies at large, in part by examining the limitations of “queer”’s deployment.⁹ For one thing, defining a bodily experience – or any cultural development, for that matter – as “queer” can be an act of privilege, a call for attention that glosses over other inequities. Moreover, calling a bodily experience “queer” can confirm or even maintain structures of normalcy: any deployment of “queer” which intends to go no further than “the opposite of normal” contributes to the simplistic binarization of social values in which “normal” is ultimately the privileged term. Thus, I do not examine my archive’s representations merely to point out how “strange” they are. I am concerned with how they not only lay out the workings of normalization, but enact alternative epistemologies. And I am concerned with how many of the representations I designate as “queer” offer internal critiques of queer logic.

This project also contributes to debates in literature and film that are rarely framed in terms of queerness. These range from metacritical issues such as periodicity, to literary/filmic themes and tropes. For example, we might attend to literary representations of the environment and landscape as a means toward examining how society comes to “know” the organic world and that which butts up against it. But I argue that such representations are more than just manifestations of ecological precepts; they are, first, manifestations of broader precepts (racial, sexual, economic, and so forth), and, second, mechanisms through which certain human experiences are either validated or pathologized. As I show in the following chapters, and in Chapters 3 and 4 in particular, dominant understandings of environment and landscape can dictate how we conceive of “the normal” and, in turn, how we conceive of different bodies that appear in those contexts.

A Word on “Transformativity”

I seek to complicate the notion of “the queer body” by zeroing in on *changeability*, not ontology or even status. As I show, bodies that go unremarked upon in certain spaces or moments might be deemed “queer” in others – a differential that itself constitutes “change.” Moreover, while the process of change itself can render a body “queer,” *failure to change* can also invoke that possibility.

This focus on changeability has multiple implications. Even as many contemporary queer theorists focus on fluidity and contingency, and cite the instability of one’s identity over time, they either ignore the body altogether or take it as *a relatively stable location for examining* these contingencies and instabilities. That is, theory has led us to question essentialism on levels ranging from the racial to the sexual, and to pay attention to such grand examples of instability as transgenderism, but we are still on the cusp of seeing the body itself as inherently plural. As a result, only discursivities, actions, or ideological stances look “queer;” the assumption that the body, even if constructed, is constant keeps one from seeing how it might intervene in heteronormative systems. My focus on changeability also speaks to feminist theory. Many late-twentieth century feminist theorists have sought to prove the non-ideality of the “real” human body, and, in contrast to many queer theorists, have insisted that the body constitutes a complex matrix of discursive positionings rather than a neutral material object. But many of these theorists either privilege the female body as the site of change par excellence, or do not fully address bodily transformativity.¹⁰ For example, the editors of *Feminist Theory and the Body* (1999) note that “feminist theorists [insist on] ... the differential forms of embodiment that confound normative boundaries” (Shildrick and Price 10) – but embodiment is multiple *unto itself*: it changes over time as one ages, and it looks different from different perspectives. Thus, my investigations seek to contribute to both queer theory and feminist theory by connecting

bodily transformativity with the mobile powers of “queer,” and by persistently foregrounding the multiplicity of embodiment, its irreducible plurality.

Perhaps most importantly, I argue that varying relationships to “the normal” can inhere in the same body. A body that does not confound any normative boundaries as a white female child will certainly do so when that body is no longer called female by its white, adult, transgendered owner – as I show in my look at trans autobiography in Chapter 3. Calling the latter experience “queer” calls attention to the fact that our narratives of bodily development impose different expectations at different moments, with varying consequences. Similarly, the minority bodies in the background of Todd Haynes’s *Safe* (1995) appear healthy from the conservative standpoint that naturalizes their work with dangerous chemicals and pollutants; to instead consider them “queer,” as I suggest we do, is not to Other them further, but to refuse to accept their suffering as “natural” – to look from the standpoint of environmental racism and find them just as threatened, if not more so, than the privileged white bodies we as viewers might otherwise focus our attentions on.

One of my overarching concerns, then, will be with how narrative frames actually “make,” or *fail to make*, as the case may be, bodily transformations. That is, the transformations, or stagnations, as the case may be, treated in my texts should be understood less as bodily events than as shifts of epistemology, and/or shifts premised upon particular epistemologies. While I do not deny the material bodily changes that are being represented in, say, tales of cancer or AIDS, I am more interested in *how we “know” change is taking place* – under what environmental and psychological conditions we can perceive it, and to what ends the dominant culture might put it (pedagogical, disciplinary, moralizing, and so forth). On the more formal side, I examine literary narrative, cinematic narrative, and developmentalism as discursive/ideological processes with

normative rules that can be bent, within limits, without obliterating comprehension completely. That is, I analyze my texts themselves as epistemological frames, while also considering the epistemological frames that they play with and critique.

Just as this project seeks to deconstruct the privilege sometimes afforded through “queer,” it also seeks to deconstruct that afforded through “queer *transformation*.” Thus, in Chapter 4, I argue somewhat paradoxically for a shift in our focus from the body of the film protagonist Carol White to those of the marginalized workers around her. Focusing on her bodily changes, as I explain, makes invisible the contamination and abuse undergone by non-white, non-affluent bodies – bodies that do not, or cannot, manifest change so obviously. Such a focus also overprivileges the narrative convention of change; as viewers, we have been trained to invest ourselves in things such as the dramatic deterioration of Carol’s body, not in things such as the static suffering of those around her. In Chapter 2, I argue that what is actually “queer” about the experience of the literary character Frankie Addams is that her body, as seen through McCullers’s framework, does *not* actually transform– at least not according to the standards set by the developmental narrative. That is, while it initially seems set to go through the “limitedly-queer” experience of adolescence, the novel gives no definitive signs that it is actually poised to *go anywhere*. The important point, then, is that the experience of a “queer transformation” is actually acceptable, even expected, within limited arenas such as adolescence – while queerness of an indeterminate duration,¹¹ as well as the total lack of transformation, are not.

The concept of queer bodily transformativity, then, is one I explore not in order to amass multiple examples of the same kind of phenomena, but to show the contingency of the very term “transformation.” Ultimately, I argue that bodily transformations, and states of bodily stasis, have no intrinsic value, no content, on their own. When they confirm the established limits for

the human body, and the narrative means through which we know that body, they go unnoticed. Only when they begin pushing against those limits and means do they gain traction. Intervening at this juncture, I argue, allows us to see the cultural work that late modernist literary and filmic representations of bodily changeability can do – and for what ends.

Developmentalism: An Overview

As stated, this project takes as its foundation the idea that it is impossible to talk about the contemporary body, or contemporary claims to the human, without talking about the discourse of developmentalism. This discourse is so fundamental to understandings of the body and the human that, despite its turn-of-the-century origins, even the late-twentieth-century texts I deal with can be seen negotiating with it. Thus, my archive not only shows that developmentalism crops up throughout late modernism, it proves its tenacity – as well as its taken-for-grantedness.

Cultural historians have connected the impulses behind developmentalism to modernity – that period of monumental changes, when the Western world was intensely concerned with measuring, and thus effecting, “progress.” “Progress,” in turn, quickly and anxiously became opposed to concepts such as “decline” and “degeneration.”¹² Philosophies such as progressivism, millennialism, evolutionary theory, scientific objectification, and perfectibility both marked and responded to the changes of modernity. Meanwhile, the standardization of time; the rise of the fields of developmental psychology, anthropology, and criminology; and other revolutions took place. Nancy Lesko argues that all of the above contributed to an intense focus on individual development – a focus that extended to those outside the immediate borders of imperial nations (such as Third World populations), and to those on the fringes thereof:

In public spectacles, scientific research, popular ideas of health and disease, and political rhetoric, adolescence – defined as ‘becoming’ – became an embodiment of and worry

about “progress” and a site to study, specify, diagnose, and enact the modern ideas for personal and social progress ... Adolescent development became a space for reformers to talk about their worries and fears and a space for public policy to enact new ideas for creating citizens and a nation that could lead and dominate the particular problems and opportunities of the modern world. (21)

Indeed, one of the most far-reaching concepts of the modern age was being redeployed at this time in the arena of child development, to great success. G. Stanley Hall, whose 1904 *Adolescence* solidified cultural understandings of that phase, exploited Ernst Haeckel’s 1866 claim that “ontology recapitulates phylogeny” to insist that child development recapitulated evolutionary development. Implicit in Haeckel’s notion was the idea that the white race was more advanced than non-white and “primitive” peoples, not to mention animals; the latter groups had simply not passed through all of the stages that the former had. Hall’s version of recapitulation theory carried with it traces of racism and xenophobia, as well as progressivist notions of perfectability, as it established the importance of developmental stages and their careful observance and monitoring. Not only did the progress of a given child take on the weight of the progress of an entire species, but Hall’s work indirectly strengthened those problematic parallels among children, animals, and non-Western (“primitive”) peoples. Despite this unsavory history, the concept of developmental stages is still front and center in pedagogy, developmental psychology, and popular understandings of the human. In fact, as Lesko points out, we need only look at concerns over precocity and timing – most obviously, the racially-tinged “epidemic” of teenagers having children “before their time,” but also the mundane obsession with timely development that grips so many parents – to understand their pervasiveness. Many of the texts I treat offer portraits of bodies that strikingly defy these normative time schemes, from those who

seek to escape the singularity of time itself in *Silverlake Life* (1993) and *Pale Fire* (1962), to those whose life trajectories double back towards a “second puberty,” in the case of transgender life narratives.

Adolescence is central, conceptually and positionally, to the concept of human developmentalism: once theorists identified adolescence as a stage (arguably, it did not exist in any consolidated form prior to the work of researchers such as Hall at the turn of the twentieth century), the distinct triumvirate of human stages – childhood, adolescence, adulthood – came into view, forming a schematized path that the individual can be determined to either be in conformity to or in defiance of. Even as the human developmental schema has been nuanced and qualified over time,¹³ adolescence has retained its reputation as the time at which young people come into sexual maturity and reproductive ability, and begin to separate from their parents; thus, it is seen as a crucial time of preparation for adulthood.¹⁴ This vision not only characterizes adulthood as “real life,” it suggests a particular teleology: childhood or adolescence are merely preparatory – dress rehearsals aimed at a successful performance. This characterization solidifies the kind of iron-clad causality that so many of my texts refuse: childhood “causes” adolescence, which in turn “causes” adulthood. The notion of adolescence thus both contributes to and confirms the progressive schema of human development, thereby producing “the adult” (the adjusted, properly-gendered and -sexualized adult) as the measure of “the human.”

Narrative and Narrative Theory

One of the main goals of this project is to examine the ways that narrative informs developmentalism. Before outlining the other theoretical paradigms I draw on, I turn here to narrative theory in order to outline this goal. Narrative theory¹⁵ has raised our consciousness about the pervasiveness of narrative form, showing that it inheres in things as taken-for-granted

as “history.” Some narrative theorists have found this pervasiveness to be a psychic necessity: as Frank Kermode observes in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1966), “we are surrounded by [chaos], and equipped for co-existence with it only by our fictive powers” (64). More recently, though, feminist narrative theorists such as Judith Roof and Susan Winnett have discussed the heterosexist implications of this pervasiveness, as well as the heterosexism of some narrative theory work itself. But few narrative theorists have examined the concept of developmentalism tout court, or its connection to narrative form. This project therefore builds on previous work to do just that, considering developmentalism as a narrative concept that enforces heteronormativity along with racial and cultural hierarchies – and which relies heavily on the concept of adolescence for its operations. I aim to make clear narrative’s role in shaping expectations for the human body in the twentieth century – and, accordingly, its role in shaping “actual” bodies – by examining how the texts I treat cite, criticize, and reconfigure this connection. Thus, while drawing on narrative theory in order to flesh out this connection, I frequently bring it to bear on my primary texts for two distinct reasons. First, these texts are narratives themselves, and therefore require formal scrutiny. Second, they works engage with narrative *as a topic*, from *Pale Fire*’s self-conscious, metafictional ruminations on life-as-narrative, to *The Member of the Wedding*’s more subtle investigations of adolescence and narrative form.

To begin with my foundational premise, I maintain that modern accounts of human development conceive of the body in narrative terms, in the classical realist sense: major events are seen as causal and interrelated (the somatic changes in puberty prepare one for sexual maturity), and there is an overall dynamic movement toward a particular telos (adolescence moves one toward adulthood). We might therefore call developmentalism both a narrative of

fulfillment and a progress narrative. As Lesko states, drawing on Johannes Fabian, “stories of cultural evolution and of individual adolescent development prioritize the ending; they are primarily *narratives of fulfillment*” (110). She also states that “adolescents [beginning in the twentieth century]... took up positions in *border zones* between the imagined end points of adult and child ... sexual and asexual [I would add properly heterosexualized and polymorphously perverse], rational and emotional, civilized and savage, and productive and unproductive” (50). Thus, the ideal modern story of human life charts the trajectory from those beginning points to those end points, confirming dominant cultural values such as capitalism, empirical knowledge, medical expertise, and technological advancement along the way.

Just as certain events in narratives are considered precipitates or catalysts for others, so is the puberty/adolescence complex situated as the experience that, ideally, leads to proper adult heterosexuality, and which produces a gendered adult out of a child of the “same” gender. (We have also just seen, not coincidentally, how this single stage of individual human development has long been believed to spur or spurn the progress of civilization.) Thus, I claim that this specific developmental stage has unique narratological properties: it functions as a catalyst, or what narrative theorist Seymour Chatman refers to in his work as a “kernel.” That is, the human developmental narrative relies on puberty/adolescence as a pivot.

In this sense, I am concerned with what Brian Richardson terms “narrative dynamics” – a phrase which “refer[s] to the movement of a narrative from its opening to its end” (1). As he explains,

The traditional well-made narrative is generally conceived as having a particular type of beginning, development, temporal arrangement, and denouement. Until fairly recently, it has been a critical commonplace that the best plot depicted, as Aristotle observed, an

action that was complete and whole, that is, one that possessed a beginning, a middle, and an end. (2)

As the notions of regression, stagnation, and aimlessness are structuring oppositions for the idea of development, so the notion of narrative dynamics informs bodily ideals, establishing (forward) movement, (revelatory) change, and (controlled) growth as desirable experiences. For example, although Richardson does not go on to explicate his use of the term “best,” I claim that classical realist narrative works in the “best” interests of white, reproductive heteronormativity, and the requirements for bodies it establishes. In so doing, I follow theorists such Roof and Winnett, but, differently from their work – which focuses on sexuality and bodily structures – I offer bodily *transformation* as a unique vantage point from which to view this process.

I am also indebted to the narrative theory work of Paul Ricoeur, who reminds us that narrative time should be understood as more than a sequence of events arranged in a straight line. As he claims, “every narrative combines two dimensions in various proportions ... the first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story as made out [of] events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events” (43). This argument prompts us to understand narratives as more than linear chronologies; as we engage with a story, we both project toward a future end, and read backwards from that end in order to satisfy an expectation of fullness. “Following [a] story is less important than apprehending the well-known episodes leading to this end,” Ricoeur argues; “time is not abolished by the teleological structure of the judgment which grasps together the events under the heading of ‘the end’” (45) – instead, time becomes something of a whole.

This perspective is crucial because it explains both why human developmentalism works as a narrative, and how narrative works to code human developmentalism: the developmental

narrative prompts us to see each stage of life as inextricable from the preceding and the proceeding, and to always already expect progress, because of how it will deliver us to the complete, valid picture that we have already envisioned. Human beings and their lives, even in our so-called postmodern times, are thus established as singular unto themselves, and preferably cohesive and developing, rather than disintegrating or regressing. In this way, my project reflects critically on the notion of postmodernism, showing, for example, that the very postmodernity of a text such as *No Telephone to Heaven* or *Silverlake Life* is not necessarily a sign of a wholesale cultural transformation, of a clean break with modernist time. Their postmodernity might, instead, constitute a reaction to the conservative, turn-of-the-century understandings of time, developmentalism, and narrative form that still persist. What is at stake in many of my analyses, then, then, is periodization – of bodies, as well as texts.

Referring to the “critical analogy” that Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot* (1984) posits between the psyche and narrative, Jay Clayton asks, “what is gained by juxtaposing two patterns if neither is conceded to be fundamental and hence explanatory of the other? ... These mirrored perceptions cannot move one outside of formalism, unless one concedes superior authority to one image rather than the other” (39). Clayton’s question pushes me to elucidate my operations here: I do not mean to say that human development is simply “like” narrative, but that it is largely articulated, and understood, *in narrative terms* – and often unthinkingly so. That is, “we” truly believe that human lives and bodies have a periodized, beginning-middle-end trajectory – without realizing that this trajectory is imagined, and that it serves particular ideological ends. In this sense, I am indebted to the charge of theorists such as Fredric Jameson, whose work goes beyond charting the formal features of narrative and methods of narration to historicize the operations of texts: as he declares in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially*

Symbolic Act (1981),

the specific critical and interpretative task of the present volume [is] namely to restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be ... the central function or *instance* of the human mind. (13, emphasis original)

Jameson qualifies this latter phrase in arguing that

the forms of human consciousness and the mechanisms of human psychology are not timeless and everywhere essentially the same, but rather situation-specific and historically produced. It follows, then, that neither the reader's reception of a particular narrative, nor the actantial representation of human figures or agents, can be taken to be constants of narrative analysis but must themselves ruthlessly be historicized. (152)

In the same spirit, I set the specific objective of investigating the ways that narrative form intersects modern bodily standards, producing (among other effects) certain forms of bodily change as "queer" – while also attending to what it means to call narrative an instance of "*the human mind*."

Clayton's "Narrative and Theories of Desire" helps to clarify the implications of this choice of focus. As he explains,

[Brooks's] goal in challenging formalism is to establish narrative as a valuable mental tool, a way of knowing. He wants to restore a cognitive dimension to our sense of narrative, to show how it is a 'specific mode of human understanding.' ... For that reason he describes narrative as a process or operation rather than as a structure, and he speaks of the many ways we 'need plotting,' of the different kinds of experience that cannot be

comprehended without narrative. (36)

But when we become enthralled with narrative for its very real uses, we potentially elide the “*misuses*” to which it has long been put, and how difficult it has been to disabuse ourselves of those habits. In fact, many of my texts, which both precede and postdate Brooks’s work, are rather skeptical of the idea that contemporary Western culture – and, in particular, the arbiters of bodies – has ever really rejected narrative as such.

This project, in sum, does not argue against narrative’s potential value, its ability to effectively achieve goals that no other forms of communication can. But I am nonetheless skeptical of the idea that we “need plotting” when it comes to the particular experiences of human bodies – and, further, I am skeptical of the very idea that a coherent, monolithic “we” exists, that benefits uniformly from “plotting.” After all, when we validate narrative as a “human” capacity, we often fail to ask *which humans* benefit from its deployment – not to mention the fact that calling that capacity “human” can effectively silence questions about its applications. Indeed, as I show throughout my chapters, the ways that classical realist narrative is intertwined with understandings of the body in the second half of the twentieth century achieve very specialized political agendas, and have detrimental effects for particular groups. As my reading of *Safe* in Chapter 4 shows, the “dramatic arc” provided by the deterioration of a white, privileged body allows the less-story-worthy experiences of other bodies, those that undertake repetitive, monotonous tasks, to fall out of focus. In short, I insist that performing social critique necessitates interrupting the narratives – and *narrative itself* – that transmit those social values. As my texts push against dominant narrative structures, and even manage to step outside those structures, they are able to present new instantiations of the body – and vice versa.

Chapter Overview

What is the relationship between the body and narrative, as articulated through late modernist texts? I address this question through my four chapters, all of which examine how such texts renegotiate modern expectations for the developing body through adjustments of classical narrative form.

Each individual chapter asks how its given works play with classical narrative, and what new or dissenting visions for bodies such play produces. The answers vary; taken together, then, these chapters register the range of late modernist alternatives to classical narrative, and the array of textual strategies employed therein. In Chapter 2, I examine how developmentalism's narrative investments position adolescence as liminal; I argue that *Member* asks us in turn to reconsider both how we approach adolescent bodies through this framework of liminality, and how we approach texts that *portray* adolescence. Through formal strategies such as analepsis and repetition, the novel thus gives us, as I have noted, the "non-futurist adolescent." In Chapter 3, I discuss how transgender texts such as *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and *No Telephone to Heaven* deploy puberty with an eye toward critiquing the Western progress narrative; they indicate how that narrative drives medicocultural conceptions of non-white and/or gender-variant bodies. These texts' subsequent creation of an anticolonial, anti-capitalist transgender imaginary, I argue, undercuts the characterization of those bodies as "underdeveloped." In Chapter 3, I argue that *Safe* at once unsettles normative identification through queer narrative-filmic techniques, and illustrates how socially-disadvantaged bodies literally fall out of view in both dominant film-viewing and dominant social practices. The film, in turn, counters the tendencies to be unsympathetic to the apparent "stagnation" of non-privileged bodies, and to only see developmental disturbances in privileged bodies as being worthy of concern. In Chapter 5, I show authorship's role as a hermeneutic for limiting the temporal and physical possibilities of

bodily interaction – particularly that with reproductive potential – through a comparative reading of the AIDS documentary *Silverlake Life* and Vladimir Nabokov’s homoerotic, parodic novel *Pale Fire*. I observe how the sexual functions of the male body resignify when these texts collapse expectations for narrative closure and “mature” reproductivity.

The thrust of my work also varies from chapter to chapter – shifting in emphasis from formal to conceptual to visual to metatextual concerns. This project thus characterizes a postwar period in which films and novels contend with modern corporeality on multiple levels, and offers sustained views onto those different levels. In turn, these chapters build upon one another in a synchronic sense, much in the same spirit of the works I consider. That is, rather than mapping out a political or cultural arc for this period, I have organized them so as to elaborate the unconscious of this period – its concerns and its fantasies – through exemplary texts. Chapter 3 offers a deep background for the close-reading claims of Chapter 2 – in which I show that *The Member of the Wedding* both outlines and formally inverts heteroreproductive, whitecentric schemas for female adolescence. Through my survey of transgender texts that uniquely treat puberty, Chapter 3 explores developmentalism’s connection to racial, cultural, and economic progressionism. Chapter 4, on *Safe*, offers a look at visibility’s role in classical narrative standards for the ideal body; whereas Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the modern emphasis on visual proof as a component in evaluating bodily transformativity, Chapter 4 explicitly probes this emphasis through a discussion of queer filmic vision. Chapter 5 takes the discussion of narrative standards for the body into explicitly metatextual and extratextual realms. Reading *Silverlake Life* and *Pale Fire*, it considers how these texts deal with the coupling of developmental expectations for human (hetero)reproductivity and the imperative of narrative closure – as well as how these texts have occasioned anxious critical responses around the same issues. This

chapter makes most pointed the claim that runs throughout this project: that classical narrative form shapes “real-world” ideas about proper embodiment – but that, in response, textual representations of the body can remake what we understand about physical experiences as “mundane” as adolescence, puberty, or ejaculation, and as extraordinary as AIDS, environmental illness, and transgenderism.

As mentioned, “transformativity” proves itself to be equivocal as it appears across my archive; as these texts show, some transformations are culturally cast as normative, others as pathological – and the same holds true for the *lack* of transformation. Accordingly, some of these chapters focus on bodies that notably change, while others focus on bodies that notably *fail* to change. This project thus points to the contingent reception of changing bodies, with an eye toward understanding how narrative can determine differing judgments. In turn, it highlights transformativity as a site for texts to negotiate even the most stringent of bodily standards.

Similarly, as developmentalism proves central to these contentions with modern corporeality, all four chapters chart its appearance in their given text – but no appearance is the same. In some instances it is the stages of developmentalism that come under scrutiny; in others, its properties; in others still, its ideals. The diverse range of bodily experiences also allows us to see that developmentalism interpellates different bodies in different ways. Moreover, this range allows us to see that developmentalism appears in rather unexpected places – not just in mid-century narratives of adolescence such as *Member*, for example, but also in late-twentieth-century tales of transgenderism. But despite these differences, and despite this range, my approach is the same: in each chapter I examine developmentalism’s relationship to classical narrative form, and thus, through all four, I trace out its continued, contested late modernist life.

Historical Perimeters and Period Concerns

Why consider works ranging from 1946 to 1995, a window that includes postmodernism as well as “pre-postmodernism” years? More specifically, why specify “late modernism” to begin with, rather than using “postmodernism” as an umbrella for my archive? To begin with, the years following the world wars constitute a relatively undertheorized period that deserves greater critical attention. In fact, the very phrase “late modernism” is rarely used in literary theory: as Tyrus Miller notes, even for those prominent theorists such as Jameson and Brian McHale, who “make important contributions to formulating a poetics of late modernism,” the period “amounts to little more than a peripheral issue, a bit of detail work on the capacious but drafty house of fiction built by Modernism, Postmodernism, and Co.” (12). I do not go as far back as Miller’s *Late Modernism* (1999), which cites the period’s start as 1926, but I find his insistence on this period’s very existence galvanizing. It calls our attention to the fact that modernist and postmodernist elements coexist compellingly in many twentieth-century texts, such that depositing those works in either one of those camps, or simply leaving them in the no-man’s-land of “pre-postmodernism,” makes little sense.

But perhaps more pressingly, focusing on this coexistence provides an occasion for (re)considering periodicity itself, and its pitfalls. Miller reminds us that designations such as modernism and postmodernism are “tools of ... historians [and theorists], professional assigners of labels not always chosen by the original participants” (22). More pointedly, Anne Friedberg notes that “*post* implies historical sequence, a moment of rupture when the *post* succeeds the *past*” – a fact that leaves even the most careful scholars of nineteenth and twentieth century culture at quite an impasse: giving “a *pre*history to the *post*modern” carries with it “the hidden danger of ... teleology,” while maintaining belief in a revelatory rupture provides an “unwitting celebration of all that is ‘new and different’ in the postmodern” (6). This project maintains an

awareness of the features that have been labeled “modern/ist” and “postmodern/ist” – finding those labels useful to the extent that they function as shorthand for those features – but also questions the assumptions behind those labels, and the version of history that they have helped create. Specifically, I posit some skepticism about postmodernism in particular; while “postmodern” is a useful descriptor for many of my works, I question postmodernism’s dominance, and the concept’s supposedly inherent radicalism. In turn, my interest in calling these works “late modernist” is an attempt to register this coexistence of elements, not to rigorously establish a new historical period – though, of course, I remain cognizant of the fact that, like “post,” “late” also implies the kind of historical sequence I am otherwise generally skeptical of.

Making critical space for post-World War II texts outside of the monolithic categories of modernism and postmodernism allows us to see the unique commentaries such texts have to make on their periods, as well as the common issues that stretch across this half of the twentieth century. For example, in Chapter 2, I discuss how 1946’s *The Member of the Wedding* speaks to specifically post-World War II concerns such as changing gender roles, while utilizing the temporal play and distorted perspective that characterize much post-World War I modernist literature, *and* while evincing the kind of destabilizations of categories such as gender and sexuality that mark postmodernist literature and thought. Finally, then, considering texts such as *Member* or 1962’s *Pale Fire* along with texts from the 1990s not only allows us to see that turn-of-the-century discourses such as developmentalism, and even older paradigms such as classical narrative form, are still being negotiated in what is essentially contemporary literature. It illuminates the contours of a phase in which these discourses and paradigms began to be addressed in heightened fashion, specifically through the queering of literary and filmic

techniques.

Skepticism of periodization, and of specific periods, does not prevent us from examining some relevant historical background about the years 1946 to 1995. To begin with, the late modernist period sees the proliferation of what has come to be termed “identity politics,” the organizing of individuals around a shared, often essentialized, marginal identity. For example, in the 1950s the Western world saw the first instances of same-sex desiring individuals actively organizing themselves under a group label.¹⁶ While the solidification of categories such as “homosexual” and “heterosexual” in the late nineteenth century no doubt contributed to this movement, as Michel Foucault tells us, others believe that particular historical developments – namely, the growth of capitalism and the cultural changes instantiated by World War II – were crucial.¹⁷

However, the last few decades of the twentieth century have seen widespread critiques of identity politics, many emanating from scholars (and critics) of postmodernity such as Jameson.¹⁸ These critiques have coincided with the large-scale political-theoretical move away from identity to identification/disidentification, from essentialism to constructionism – a chipping-away, in short, at Enlightenment ideas of the unified, coherent self and at Cartesian ideals of the mind as superior to the body. According to Carla Freccero,

of the few central beliefs uniting the various post-structuralisms (and connecting them with post/modernism) this is one of the most important: human identity is seen to be determined by, for example, the pre-existing structures of language and ideology, and by the material conditions of human existence. Thus is the subject decentered, and subjectivity revealed as a kind of subjection. (2)

This flow of intellectual and cultural energies has fed, in various ways, into the development of

approaches including queer theory, transgender studies, poststructuralist feminist theory, postmodern studies, critical race studies, and ecocriticism.

My project draws on all of these theoretical approaches for its analyses, but also illustrates how the texts I treat actually engage with and develop these approaches – to which they are contemporaneous. Within the purview of this work, then, literature and theory are deeply intertwined, even mutually constitutive. This multifaceted historical approach has two important implications. First, while this project might fall under the heading “queer theory,” I insist that issues of queerness cannot be separated out from those of race, class, gender, or environment. Thus, for example, in explicating the dominant paradigm of reproductive heterosexuality through multiple theoretical approaches, I am also able to look at a host of related cultural expectations for bodies, including whiteness, stable gender, “maturity,” and “productivity.” Second, my texts themselves call out for such multifaceted treatments, partially producing them in the process. For example, I show that neither a feminist nor an ecocritical nor a queer theoretical nor an anti-racist approach can, on its own, account for the complexity of *Safe*: the film asks us to consider the imbrications of all of the above.

This project seeks to offer unique critical contributions to each theoretical field it engages. But perhaps its most pressing work is to envision how these fields actually engage *with one another*. After all, it is no minor detail that the approaches I bring to bear on my texts – most prominently, queer theory, feminist theory, and transgender studies, as well as postmodern studies – have a long history of vexed relationships with one another. A select catalog will illustrate this claim: Queer theory is often charged with being unfeminist, not to mention ignorant of class and race concerns. Acute antagonisms have long existed between certain lesbian academics – particularly lesbian feminists – and transgender studies. Many of those who

have embraced the term “queer” have, in turn, let “lesbian” fall out of favor. Postmodernists who champion “new” theoretical paradigms appear hypocritical in that postmodernity allegedly marks the end of the dominant, linear models of time that make “old” and “new” self-evident categories. Thus, looking at how my texts articulate these paradigms allows me to make cases for their unique interlockings, despite their fraught relationships, and to elucidate their valuable corrections to one another. Here, I offer a brief summary of how I bring each of these paradigms to bear on my work, followed by a discussion of how I find their contestations to offer not chaos, but valuable friction.

Queer Theory

Many queer theorists consider the skepticism of “true” identity, which marks postmodernism, to be crucial to the project of “queer.” As Carla Freccero observes,

[the] conceptualization [of the individual as constituted by the pre-existing order] allows the suspension by the subject, and any particular instance of the subject, of a normative gender and its concomitant heteronormatively other-directed desiring orientation. Only a textual, nonunified, nonpsychologized subject could be said to allow for such a suspension, at least within a heteronormative and homophobic cultural context. (2)

Queer theory’s investment in such operations links it to a larger network of poststructuralist movements – thereby indicating that its energies cannot be fully confined to gender and/or sexuality.¹⁹ Thus, while this intellectual model has roots in gay and lesbian politics, Annamarie Jagose sees it as more broadly

informed by historically specific knowledges which constitute late twentieth-century western thought. Similar shifts can be seen in both feminist and postcolonial theory and practice when, for example, Denise Riley (1988) problematises feminism’s insistence on

‘women’ as a unified, stable and coherent category, and Henry Louis Gates (1985) denaturalises ‘race’ ... Queer ... exemplifies a more mediated relation to categories of identification. Access to the post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal identification and political organization. (78)

In other words, skepticism of identity has been key to queer theory,²⁰ but *sexual* identity is often only one part of that picture. Accordingly, my work is attuned to the fact that rigid gender roles, stable gender, and racial purity (i.e. whiteness) are inescapable features of the paradigm of heteronormativity – and it therefore deconstructs those categories as well. In this way, I offer an articulation of queer theoretical inquiry that aims to be considered clearly feminist and anti-racist.

Besides identity, temporality is the other major paradigm that comes under the critical glance of “queer” in this project.²¹ Though the two are closely linked, as I will illustrate, time has been a more recent preoccupation of queer theorists, as evidenced by the publication of Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Madhavi Menon and Jonathan Goldberg’s “Queering History” (2005) and other prominent works. Edelman considers time in terms of resistance to futurity, declaring, “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism ... *queerness* ... figures ... the place of the social order’s death drive” (3, emphasis original). Halberstam’s work suggests that normative identity and normative temporality are mutually constitutive, claiming that “queer uses of time ... develop, at least in part, in opposition to the

institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification” (1).

Halberstam draws on postmodern theorists such as David Harvey, who argues that time is organized according to capital accumulation. But one of her major contributions to postmodernist thought is to insist that time is also organized according to heteronormative reproductivity – thus, that which shows no concern for longevity or legacy gets produced as “queer” or pathological. I follow Halberstam’s claim, paying close attention to how time is critiqued for radical ends in many of the works I consider. But I argue that these texts show us something else about time: that we mark time through bodies, and mark time *on* bodies, in ways that are largely informed by classical narrative form. The regulated, standardized concept of modern time, and its connection to ideals of productivity and progress, clearly undergird the ideals of “human development.” Thus, in queering the discourse of developmentalism, my texts also necessarily critique normative temporality. For example, time takes on a wholly different meaning in the narratives of transgenderism I consider, wherein subjects are not authorized through developmentalism, but instead authorize themselves through the anti-linear, anti-progressive concept of the second puberty. We might then say that these postmodern narratives question the notion of “progress” and “overcoming” inherent in the modern concept of time,²² while also indicating that this politically conservative concept is still pervasive. That is, “postmodernism” is never fully *post* modernism.

While Jagose locates queer theory in the late twentieth century (indeed, the first mention of the term is usually traced back to 1991²³), my consideration of earlier works such as *The Member of the Wedding* and *Pale Fire* illustrates that the marks of an anti-identitarian, antifuturist queerness crop up much earlier.²⁴ We might therefore also say that writers such as

McCullers imagine “queer” *not* as a reaction-formation to “gay and/or lesbian,” as many queer theorists have, but as a possible mid-century positioning *beforehand*, or *alongside*, “gay and/or lesbian.” This fact puts the genealogy of theoretical, and not just social, concepts into question: if “gay and/or lesbian” need not have preceded “queer,” criticism of queer theory as merely faddish, postmodern posturing – the new theoretical kid on the block that seeks to supplant old models, including the gender-specific “lesbian” – is not wholly accurate. My treatment of these texts opens up the question not just of how we periodize bodies, and how we periodize texts, but of how we periodize cultural and intellectual thought.

Transgender Studies

Contemporary fascination with gender transitions can be traced back to (if not further) *Member's* post-World War II milieu, when army veteran George Jorgensen's 1952 transformation into Christine Jorgensen became a media spectacle. But transgender studies is a relatively new field, one often associated with the theoretical developments of the late twentieth century. Its status as a field is highly contestable, of course, as many would fold its concerns into queer theory, gender studies, or cultural studies. But it nonetheless deserves its own separate discussion here for several reasons. First, understanding the implications of the transgender narratives I treat in Chapter 3 requires not just an awareness of the imperatives of human development, but an awareness of the unique disruptions that transgenderism poses to that schema, and its dominant ideals of progress and perfectability. Second, the field's concerns are, simply put, the same as those of this project: as Susan Stryker notes in the introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), the field is “an interdisciplinary [one] ... [that] is as concerned with material conditions as it is with representational practices, and often pays particularly close attention [to] the interface between the two ... It investigate[s] questions of

embodied difference, and analyze[s] how such differences are transformed into social hierarchies” (3). The inquiries being undertaken by transgender studies, in other words, speak to “embodied difference” at large. Likewise, while I consider the trans body in great depth, I refuse to consider it the preeminent queer transforming body. Indeed, one of this project’s goals is to draw attention to bodily transformativity *itself* as a rarely-examined example of “embodied difference.”

Stryker describes transgender studies as an inherently postmodern field, but not (just) because the term “transgenderism” appeared in the late twentieth century, encompassing and going beyond the “transsexual” label applied to Jorgenson. As she explains, transgender studies “takes aim at the modernist epistemology that treats gender merely as a social, linguistic, or subjective representation of an objectively knowable material sex. Epistemological concerns lie at the heart of transgender critique” (8). By “modernist epistemology,” Stryker means the “mirror theory of knowledge” – the belief that “real” phenomena exist, which are captured or displayed by representations. But transgenderism puts the “real” of sex into question through incoherent representation; a female gender for a male body, for example, cannot sustain the assumption that there *is* simply such a thing as a male body. Such incoherence, instead, reveals gender not as the representation of sex, but as that which, in most cases, simply props up the fantasy of a “real,” ontological sex.

Some theorists have insisted that this link between postmodernity and transgenderism, while generally apparent, still requires careful examination. Rita Felski, for one, takes to task theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, who goes so far in making this link that he can title one of his essays “We Are All Transsexuals Now.” Felski’s article, “Fin de Siecle, Fin du Sexe,” summarizes the postmodernity/transgenderism connection as such:

The destabilization of the male/female divide is seen to bring with it a waning of temporality, teleology, and grand narrative; the end of sex echoes and affirms the end of history, defined as the pathological legacy and symptom of the trajectory of Western modernity. Ineluctably intertwined in symbiotic relationship, phallogentrism, modernity, and history await their only too timely end, as a hierarchical logic of binary identity and narrative totalization gives way to an altogether more ambiguous and indeterminate condition. (566)

Felski criticizes conversations about “the end of history” as being, ironically, temporal and teleological in character, and for privileging postmodernism over modernism – when postmodern thought in general militates against simple models of genealogy, progressivism, and teleology. Moreover, she cautions that such talk about the end of “grand narrative” elides the fact that there are individuals who have never fit into that narrative.

My contribution to the field of transgender studies is similar in spirit to Felski’s in that it reexamines notions of periodicity and historiography – but does so with an eye toward how certain contemporary bodies are specifically disciplined and limited by those notions. I argue that viewing transgenderism as futuristic, as the product of crises in epistemology (knowledge) and ontology (identity) – in short, as simply “postmodern” – has the effect of papering over local, “organic,” and indigenous articulations of trans. In Chapter 3, I note that such articulations have the potential to oppose capitalist domination and Western progressivism as they are instantiated in technology and medicine. At the same time, I insist that these defiances need not in turn pathologize Western, medicalized transsexuals, or render *them*, paradoxically, anachronistic: it is not one’s body itself that matters, then, but how that body is positioned in relationship to the “post/modernity” that supposedly makes it possible. My arguments here rest implicitly on a

queered temporality rather than on clear genealogical and progressivist models – those which would have it, say, that “transgender” supplants “transsexual,” or that medical technology eventually triumphed in figuring out how to “fix” those with gender dysphoria.

I insist that we see the groundwork for transgenderism as a concept, and even for transgender studies, being laid in early, “pre-postmodern” works such as *The Member of the Wedding*. This text’s at-once simple and world-shattering insight, that the female preadolescent body does not necessarily portend the female adult body, constitutes more than an intervention into developmentalism. It is a conceptual move that allows for the revisionism and empowered decoupling of the adult self from childhood expectations – the same move around which trans politics currently organizes. At the same time, such a move has obvious connections to the Second Wave feminist mantra that biology is not destiny. Indeed, *Member*’s suggestion that *biology is framed so as to idealize a particular destiny* can be read not only as a unique presaging of that Second Wave mantra, but as an indication of how feminist thought actually works to make the transgender body visible – despite the animosities of many feminist theorists to transgenderism.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is a broader and more diffuse category than either queer theory or transgender studies, and its relationship to the notion of “queer bodily transformativity” therefore cannot be easily summed up. But we might begin with a brief survey of the role of the body in feminist theory. First, looking at the body at all, as I do here, has feminist implications. As Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price note, “the status of the body within the dominant Western intellectual tradition has largely been one of absence or dismissal” – in no small part because of corporeality’s association with femininity. Thus, “rather than a thoroughgoing disregard for

things corporeal, feminism starts at least from a position of acknowledgement” (1) – whether a given feminist theorist goes on to downplay the body in an attempt at including the female in the dominant order (a position Shildrick and Price deem “somatophobic”); to celebrate the uniqueness of the female body in an attempt to (re)value it; or to complicate both approaches by investigating the cultural construction of the body.

Here I seek to do the last of these. This project rejects somatophobia from the first, arguing that the body is bound up with everything from our notions of time to our processing of literature – making it a crucial site of cultural investigation. And it rejects essentialist claims that see the female body as unique, given its capacity for gestation, birth, lactation, and other dynamic processes. Indeed, my inclusion of the male body in this project is premised on the belief that corporeal transformativity and production are in no way female-specific. But far from being anti-feminist, this inclusion of the male body is *adamantly* feminist. For one thing, focusing on the male body loosens the association between corporeality and femininity. It also demystifies the privileged (straight) male position of disembodiment. As Kaja Silverman avers, “masculinity is predicated upon th[e] denial [of specularity and narcissism]” (363) – thus, “gay men, with women,” have always been “located decisively on the side of the spectacle” (354), their bodies open to disciplinary and pathologizing scrutiny. This project puts a wide spectrum of changing bodies – those of straight men, straight women, queer men, queer women, transgendered men, transgendered women, gender-variant persons, gender-indeterminate persons, transgendered children and adolescents, and non-transgendered children and adolescents – under scrutiny with the opposite effect in mind: deconstructing heteronormative culture and the unexamined, non-embodied masculinity that so often organizes it.

Contestations

The editors of *The Lesbian Postmodern* (1994) note that “mediation between the positions of feminist and postmodern theorists has been scant. Feminist resistance to postmodernism is well documented” (xi).²⁵ Yet their volume questions just how incompatible these positions are; as Robyn Wiegman asks in the introduction,

What happens to categories of difference under the rubric of post/modernity once the forward thrust of Enlightenment narrativity has been challenged for its illusory epistemology and revealed as quite exceedingly Eurocentric and male? When [critics such as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson] ... cite the postmodern as making impossible a ‘critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race, and class’ ... they tacitly assume that the categories of gender, race, and class are *fully adequate* to the task of defining and critiquing relations of domination. I would want to counter this assumption, especially in the context of contemporary feminist theory, whose energy has been turning increasingly to the elisions, exclusions, and amputations that the categorical litany of differences unwittingly produces. (15)

Their volume also offers ample evidence of how postmodern literary techniques have been put to feminist ends. Writing of Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, Laura Doan claims,

[She] constructs her narrative by exploiting the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction (such as intertextuality, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the rewriting of history, and frame breaks) as well as its ideology (questioning ‘grand narratives,’ problematizing closure, valorizing instability, suspecting coherence, and so forth) in order to challenge and subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique. (138)

This project not only focuses on works that could be considered both feminist and postmodern

by those same criteria, it thereby illuminates just how seriously we should take Wiegman's charge: for example, in my chapter on *Safe*, I show how seeing bodies only through singular categories, such as "woman," or "unsafe," allows us to establish and maintain visual hierarchies.

Writers such as Shane Phelan find "postmodernism [to be] particularly hostile to lesbian feminism because of its insistence that all subjectivity is suspect, even though it is precisely the awareness of oneself as a 'speaking subject' that lesbians most need to develop" (Goodloe 5). Complaints such as Phelan's are valuable for reminding us that those most vulnerable have seen necessity in shoring up cultural gains through identity politics. But poststructuralist critiques of "speaking subjectivity" point to the limits of discourse, to the ways in which simply "speaking as a lesbian" does not necessarily *solve* the political problems faced by lesbians, but points or even contributes to a larger network of problems. Moreover, interrogations of subjectivity often seek to break down *male* identity, *white* identity, *straight* identity and other hegemonic categories – and categorization itself, as that which allows for the hierarchies in which males, whites, and straights dominate females, non-whites, and non-straights. While I am generally invested in the goals of these postmodern "breakdowns," I insist more specifically on the developmental schema as a target: I show that the late modernist works I consider engage in the breakdown of unified temporality and the signifying chain, and that these approaches bear the potential for a radical disarticulation of the pro-reproductive, white-centric, heterosexist developmental schema. As Jameson observes of postmodern affect, "[these breakdowns] com[e] before the subject with heightened intensity ... [often] described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality" – which seems to be Phelan's position – "but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria" (27-8).

In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Jagose notes that feminists have likewise been skeptical of the potential erasure of women-and-or-lesbians within queer theory:

“Lesbian” itself began to circulate widely only when a nascent lesbian feminism became disillusioned with masculinist bias in the priorities of both the homophile and subsequently gay liberation movements. So, for many lesbian feminists, the rise of queer and its claims to gender non-specificity already evoke an unwelcome sense of *déjà vu*. (116)

But the troublesome non-specificity of queer theory may extend beyond gender; as Goodloe summarizes, the “problem with subsuming gay and lesbian studies under the heading ‘queer,’” per theorists such as Jacqueline Zita, is that

gay male academics haven’t adequately theorized oppression on bases other than sexuality (such race, gender, class, ability), and instead tend to privilege homophobia as ‘the’ central form of oppression ... Feminism, on the other hand, has been much more willing to expand its analyses to incorporate multiple oppressions – to, in fact, argue that all forms of oppression are fundamentally linked to each other. (4)

Zita’s objection is well taken, particularly when we realize that prominent queer theory texts such as Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) do not carefully consider the reasons why some gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered individuals – say, economically vulnerable persons, or those who are not U.S. citizens – might seek the safety of conformity rather than the tenuousness of a radical queer position. But even these objections do not prove that queer theory itself (or the concept of “queer”) is inherently discriminatory, at worst, or, at best, ignorant of issues other than sexuality. Indeed, it forgets that many queer theorists have carefully shown that sexuality is always already bound up with beliefs about race, class, gender,

ability, and location – which this project also strives to do. That is, though I take up the (supposedly) gender-neutral concept of “queer” with my works, I remain cognizant of the unique gendered, raced, and classed positions of the bodies depicted.

We might also argue that accusations of queer theory’s unfeminist character misconstrue the very basis on which the field is premised. “Queer,” as discussed in my introduction, is dedicated to disarticulating the normalizing fusion of sex, gender, and sexuality – meaning that a queer position could never be premised on a concept as simple or stable as “manhood,” much less “womanhood.” Such accusations also assume that feminism’s historical focus on gender has sufficiently accounted for those at the very margins of gender – those whose incoherence when it comes to sex, gender, and desire are so startling that even an appeal to the categories of “lesbian” or “woman” (or “gay male,” or “man,” for that matter) offers them no protection. But these accusations also remind us, first, that the appearance of a new field can allow “old” problems to appear solved, and, second, that the theoretical premises of a field can shift over time. Thus, I not only take criticism of queer theory as a reminder that bodies recognized more clearly as, say, female or feminine should neither overshadow individuals at the margins of gender, nor be subordinated to their concerns – and, in fact, this is a false antagonism; pitting “the queer” or “the trans” against the “female-and-or-lesbian” distracts us from the radical project of insisting that *neither* the body marked “female” nor the body marked “neither clearly female nor male” deserves persecution. Indeed, *both* markings are often used as tools of persecution in the first place.

Finally, perhaps the most highly vexed relationship exists between certain feminist camps and transgenderism.²⁶ Some of the more prominent objections have come from lesbian feminists such as Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, both of whom have attacked transgenderism as a

cynical machination rooted in misogyny; Raymond's manifesto against male-to-female transsexuals, *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), argues that these individuals seek to make the female body obsolete by making it a commodity to be appropriated through medical technology, while Jeffreys's writings on female-to-male transgenderism – including “FTM Transsexualism and the Destruction of Lesbians,” in *Unpacking Queer Politics* (2003) – characterize it an extreme manifestation of internalized homophobia and misogyny. Less virulent feminist readings of transgenderism have been concerned with whether transpeople reify or even fetishize the gender roles and stereotypes that feminism has worked so hard to break down. Felski traces these debates back to a fundamental irony: “gender ... remains both essential and impossible for feminism, which shifts between a radical questioning of the ontology of femininity and an insistence upon its real effects” (572). Indeed, one might say that feminists who oppose biological determinism – as most do, the concept having been recognized by feminists of all stripes as a basis for misogyny, restrictive gender roles, and male dominance throughout history – cannot have it both ways by insisting that male-born persons remain male, and female-born persons remain male. As Stephen Whittle summarizes, “[such criticisms] assume[e] that biology is destiny, despite all that feminism seems to say in opposition to this in terms of the pre-determination of sex and gender roles” (197).

Such objections and contradictions may indicate that some branches of feminist theory will never reconcile themselves with transgenderism or transgender studies. But I want to return to Felski's statement in order to read it not as the registration of a paralyzing hypocrisy, but as the illumination of an exciting problematic.²⁷ This statement indicates, first, the existence of a feminism that can both recognize the real-world implications (“real effects”) of how bodies are understood, *and* perform intellectual investigations into the discursive operations through which

bodies are constructed (“radical questioning of ... ontology”). The refusal to privilege either insists on the inseparability of the two undertakings. In other words, the oscillation between the two does not represent indecisiveness or incoherency, but the absolute possibility, and absolute *necessity*, of doing both. And therein lies a view of just how feminism, in a “post-gender” world, could matter; how feminism might not only be compatible with, but central to transgender studies, and vice versa: it shows us that radically questioning gender (and sex), or “deconstructing” them altogether, does not immediately produce a world in which gendering (and sexing) does not happen to bodies. A radical feminist(-trans-queer) endeavor consists at least in part of grappling with the pervasive *reality-effects* of the gendering and sexing of bodies. This project does just that, focusing on the narrative-and-developmental discourses shaping bodies, as well as how various texts depict the experience of being “shaped.”

We might turn to a recent textual example to see how the negotiation of two or more of these often-antagonistic paradigms sets a striking political agenda: Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007) insists that feminism is not a relic in a postmodern world in which gender and sex have been rigorously deconstructed; transgender studies and the experience of transgendered individuals might, in fact, constitute a revitalized call for critical feminist theorizing. She asserts that, while “it might seem like binary gender norms are at the core of all anti-trans discrimination[,] ... most of the anti-trans sentiment that I have had to deal with as a transsexual woman is probably better described as misogyny” (3) – an experience that indicates that heteropatriarchy disdains not (just) femaleness, but *femininity*. Thus, she argues that, while female-to-male transpeople “face discrimination for breaking gender norms ... their expressions of maleness or masculinity themselves are not targeted for ridicule – to do so would require one to question masculinity itself” (14). In

response, then, it is not enough “for trans activists to challenge binary gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism) – we must also challenge the idea that femininity is inferior to masculinity and that femaleness is inferior to maleness [i.e., traditional sexism]. ... By necessity, trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement” (17).

This project approaches such paradigms as queer theory, feminist theory, and transgender studies as concentric circles, ones that reveal provocative points of contestation as they move across and within my texts. Like Serano, I find it urgent to at once recognize the tensions between these paradigms, and refuse to definitively separate them: in my usage of “queer,” I remain aware of the gender, class, race, and environmental concerns so often elided in deployments of that term; my work on transgenderism maintains skepticism of its postmodern positioning, a positioning that can valorize Western development at the expense of local and individual expression; I insist that, despite the pervasive claim that the postmodern world has little sense of history or historicity, we recognize how the ideals of progressivism and technological modernity still exert pressure on both First World and postcolonial locations; and I am conscious of gender-specific experiences of bodily transformativity, even as I turn to bodies that cannot fit within any gender category.

Notes

¹ We also do not know the narrator's race or ethnicity, though critics primarily focus on this figure's unsexed/ungendered status.

² Many critics have also traced the novel's erotic and visceral descriptions back to a tradition of lesbian writing, frequently citing Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* as an influential text. See Lisa Moore's "Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbians in the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson" and Christy L. Burn's "Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern World."

³ See Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she describes how cancer was once considered a "side effect" of being taciturn and insular.

⁴ As Brian Finney notes, "some critics," and surely many readers, "have gone to enormous lengths to cite textual evidence for their assumption about the gender of the narrator." But these are only assumptions; "their ingenious detective work is rendered pointless" (25). I would add that these critics or readers are not merely "misguided" insofar as they expect a revelation that never comes; we might say that they are "misguided" – though, from a dominant cultural perspective, spot-on – in equating gender with epistemology.

⁵ By this I mean classical realist narrative: that which appears to us as a reasonable representation of events that *could have happened*. This form is premised upon an understanding of causality and normative temporality, factors which I look at in some depth.

⁶ I use the term "postmodern studies" as a catch-all to refer to work on the *concept* of postmodernism as well as work on the *period* so named. This work sometimes overlaps, but not always: some theorists take the existence of postmodernism for granted, while others reject its "actual" existence and instead study why we *think* it exists. In any case, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* provides a helpful statement: "I take it as axiomatic that 'modernist history' is the first casualty and mysterious absence of the postmodernism period ... the notion of progress and telos remained alive and well up to very recent times indeed" (xi). Postmodernism, in short, has come to mean a post-World War II changed relationship to temporality, a debatable prospect that I discuss further in my preamble and first chapter.

⁷ Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1978) has been largely credited with tracing how scientific work on "the homosexual" actually constructed, rather than simply described, this category.

⁸ My chapter on *Safe* perhaps best exemplifies how the dominance of certain epistemological frames can lead even the most radical of readings to maintain hegemonic ways of seeing.

⁹ While the reclamation of "queer" in intellectual circles emerged from, among other sources, a poststructuralist critique of assimilationist gay and lesbian politics, its use can actually have normalizing effects.

¹⁰ Focusing on such bodily changes as, say, pregnancy and breastfeeding – as do feminist philosophers such as Julia Kristeva – certainly has the effect of putting into question our cultural view of the body as stable and solitary. At the same time, feminist analyses that focus on how the female body thereby contradicts ideal (masculine) traits leave the male body unquestioned. Moreover, they have the potential to essentialize such processes – processes that only *some* female bodies undergo.

¹¹ In *Curiouser and Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley make the point, as I note in my chapter on *The Member of the Wedding*, that childhood queerness is acceptable to the extent that it portends a disavowal thereof.

¹² Nancy Lesko observes, "metaphors of progress and gradualism have been among the most pervasive in Western thought. The late 1800s inherited a long and rich set of images and ideas about progress, and the new sciences of physical anthropology, psychology, biology, and medicine offered tools to better understand progress; to rank individuals, groups, and societies as savage, backward, or most advanced; and to diagnose impediments to progress.

The Great Chain of being was a constant reference point in popular and scientific conversations in the late 1800s” (22).

¹³ As I discuss in Chapter 1, theorists have subdivided adolescence up into early, middle, and late adolescence – which, of course, only further ratifies human development as a tripartite schema, and a one conceived of through normative definitions of time and historical progress. Moreover, while, as I note in my coda, Western public culture has become increasingly aware of exceptions to the rule of human development, these exceptions often serve only to underscore the rule.

¹⁴ See, for example, Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), which I discuss at length in this project.

¹⁵ Narrative theory is often referred to as narratology.

¹⁶ In the United States, early “homosexual” activism was termed “the homophile movement.”

¹⁷ See Thomas Fahy’s “‘Some Unheard-of Thing’: Freaks, Families, and Coming of Age in *The Member of the Wedding*,” which discusses World War II-era cultural changes. See also John D’Emilio’s histories of sexuality, including “Capitalism and Gay Identity” in 1992’s *Making Trouble*.

¹⁸ Jameson actually suggests that identity politics has proliferated under the aegis of the postmodern; he claims, “the emergence of the ‘new social movements’ is an extraordinary historical phenomenon that is mystified by the explanation so many postmodernist ideologues feel themselves able to propose; namely, that the new small groups arise in the void left by the disappearance of social classes and in the rubble of the political movements organized around those. How classes could be expected to disappear, save in the unique special-case scenario of socialism, has never been clear to me; but the global restructuring of production and the introduction of radically new technologies ... explain why so many people have been willing to think so, at least for a time ... [T]he new social movements and the newly emergent global proletariat both result from the prodigious expansion of capitalism in its third (or ‘multinational’) stage; both are in that sense ‘postmodern’” (*Postmodernism* 319). As he concludes, “pluralism is thus the ideology of groups, a set of phantasmatic representations that triangulate three fundamental pseudoconcepts: democracy, the media, and the market” (*Postmodernism* 320).

¹⁹ Jagose states, “queer theory’s debunking of stable sexes, genders[,] and sexualities develops out of ... the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (3).

²⁰ As Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) strikingly pronounces, “queer can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one” (17).

²¹ I am indebted to my colleague Donald Jellerson for citing these two axes as those on which queer theory stakes its ground. Keeping these two in view, importantly, prevents “queer” as a concept from diffusing indefinitely, from losing all meaning, and from advancing conservative agendas. I believe that having these axes more clearly in mind would have helped me respond more astutely to a participant at the 6th Queer Theory Conference at UNC Asheville; after insisting that “queer” describes anyone who occupies a minority position, another participant asked if that would include a homophobe who walked into our midst. The first participant said “yes;” collective groans ensued, but no well-formulated response followed.

²² See my opening epigraph from Rita Felski.

²³ That year, the Teresa deLauretis-edited special issue of the feminist journal *differences*, titled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” appeared.

²⁴ In particular, Lori Kenschaft and Rachel Adams have shown how Carson McCullers’s representations of non-normative sexuality do not take on coalesced, stable forms – making them more affined with “queer” than “gay and/or lesbian” – which is all the more notable for the fact that a broader homosexual identity had barely been coalesced at that point. As Kenschaft claims, McCullers “never portrayed homosexuality as a social or political

entity: in her texts, homoerotic interests do not make for a basis for human connection and collective activity as they do in many actual lesbian and gay communities” (227).

²⁵ Laura Doan explains, “many postmodern theorists have been largely uninterested in questions pertaining to gender [not to mention sexuality] and some feminist theorists regard postmodern theory with wariness at best and distrust and hostility at worst; as Christine Di Stefano argues, ‘to the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodern prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency’” (140).

²⁶ I bracket transgender studies out of this discussion for several reasons, including that the field is relatively new, and that feminist resistance therefore has not been (cannot have been) aimed at the formation of the discipline, but rather at the notion of transgender identity at large.

²⁷ Which way she intends it is not, to me, entirely clear.

Chapter 2:

Somatic Syntax: Replotting the Developmental Narrative in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*

"I wish tomorrow was Sunday instead of Friday ..."
"Sunday will come," said Berenice. "I doubt it," said Frankie.
– *The Member of the Wedding*

"What defines a nonnarratable element is its incapacity to generate a story. Properly or intrinsically, it has no narrative future."¹
– D.A. Miller, "Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel"

The first sentence of Carson McCullers's 1946 novel, set during World War II, reads, "It² happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old" (3). While seemingly transparent, the terms "summer" and "twelve years old" encode particular cultural assumptions. "Summer" is a distinct period preceded by spring and succeeded by fall; "twelve" has, since the turn of the twentieth century, been known as an adolescent age.³ Adolescence, in turn, is understood as a distinct psychological, somatic, and social period preceded by childhood and succeeded by adulthood. For the omniscient narrator to state that Frankie "was twelve," then, immediately positions Frankie in the reader's mind as a liminal figure, inevitably facing a battery of changes.

None of these understandings appears to be problematic at first glance. Indeed, "summer follows spring," "adolescence leads to adulthood," and "adolescence is a time of change" seem to be unimpeachable facts. The text's other early references to seasonality may therefore read as unremarkable at first, such as when the omniscient narrator states that "April came that year sudden and still ... The pale wisterias bloomed all over town, and silently the blossoms shattered" (22). But such passages actually prompt us to recognize the codified character of normative temporality, and to scrutinize normativity itself. For one thing, by juxtaposing a

season with a developmental stage, *Member's* first sentence reminds us of the metaphoric, and not purely scientific, character of developmentalism. It illustrates both developmentalism's constructedness, and our poverty of terms unique to the actual processes of bodily change. Indeed, the broad, imprecise metaphors of seasonality have long been used to articulate adolescence. In 1959, for example, psychologist Normal Kiell wrote of this stage as an "awful springtime of beauty" and a "season of shames" (13).⁴ While *Member's* juxtaposition of season with stage invokes this tendency, the novel's diction and imagery deconstruct its effects. For example, "the pale wisterias bloomed" may allude to the maturation and attendant reproductivity that the white adolescent body – represented by Frankie – seems to portend, but the narrator makes this portent seem ominous, not natural or ideal, by stating that the "blossoms *shattered*." Moreover, the malapropism of "shattered" – blossoms, being organic, fibrous objects, do no such thing – defamiliarizes the process of development and invites us to reconsider its "neutral" facts.⁵ Whereas "blossoming" implies the revelation of a predetermined shape, "shattering" suggests the precariousness of such a shape.

This chapter claims that *Member's* thematic and formal engagements with temporality open the notion of "human development" up for critical examination. The text shows human development to be, first and foremost, a classical narrative paradigm – one exceedingly difficult to interrogate, precisely because of its natural appearance.⁶ More specifically, McCullers's work indicates that adolescence is less a concept derived from actual biological processes than a reified moment in a story constructed to serve such twentieth-century ideals as whiteness, heterosexuality, reproductivity, and progress. Adolescence is a conceptual pivot that allows human development to function *as a classical narrative*. I focus here on the ways in which the text both exposes that state of affairs, and treats adolescence in non-narrative terms. These tactics

include the depiction of personal difficulties with narrativity, the refusal of dynamism, and the use of the literary devices of repetition and analepsis. Through difficulties with narrativity – including the protagonist’s inability to imagine future events, and to determine what constitutes a finished story – *Member* metafictionally resists the notion that linear, teleological narrative form is natural or inevitable. Through physical description (and the lack thereof), the novel also resists thinking of *adolescents* as naturally teleological, as always already heading toward the closure of normative adulthood. By structurally and diegetically repeating a “beginning-middle-end” schema in relation to its adolescent protagonist, the novel parodies the trajectory of classical narrative. Finally, through analepsis, the novel retards the forward momentum we expect of both fictional stories and the adolescent body.

Following these claims, we might say that *Member* introduces us to a twelve-year-old girl in its first sentence only to spend the remainder of its diegesis defying readerly expectations for what such a body means – and thereby defying expectations for what a “coming-of-age” novel looks like. It highlights the fact that bodies are read syntactically – necessarily producing as unrecognizable or queer those that refuse proper order(ing). And it asks us if we can imagine adolescence outside of the diachrony of human development, and thus outside of heteronormative terms. (In sometimes suggesting that the answer is probably “no,” the text points not to the rigidity of biology but rather to the rigidity of the lenses through which we comprehend biology.) Adolescence, in this framework, becomes something heretofore unthinkable: an event that belongs to an ostensible narrative and yet does not serve any normative narrative ends, and an experience that does not confirm the story that the very word “adolescence” purports to tell. As Rachel Adams argues, “McCullers’s freaks are figures of possibility ... the reader open to the queer suggestions of McCullers’s fiction is left to consider

the possibilities of a world free from the tyranny of the normal” (553). It will be my contention that *Member* allows us to see one prominent way in which this tyranny of the normal is upheld: not simply through acts of violence or shaming, but through the forcible application of dominant narrative standards to adolescent bodies, via developmentalism – and via the fiction of *of* developmentalism.

Because it thereby interrogates one of the central mechanisms by which heteronormativity is both enforced and naturalized, we might call *Member* a queer text. But these machinations also mark *Member* as a particular kind of late modernist novel.⁷ It reveals the norms of classical realist narrative – which shape the plot of the traditional novel as well as accounts of human development – by both exaggerating and circumventing those norms. It bends the rules of storytelling nearly to the point of diegetic incomprehensibility and non-action, while alluding to those rules often enough for us to recognize them for what they really are. *Member* is therefore a narrative about narrative, but not in a self-aware or -reflexive spirit. In fact, as I will note, lack of awareness characterizes both *Member*'s protagonist and its implied narrator. Perhaps most importantly, the text does not just deconstruct adolescence or developmentalism, but presents the reader with new models for conceiving of somatic experience. *Member* thus constitutes both a critique of dominant narrative logic as it inheres in developmentalism, and a unique narratological act in its own right.

Developmentalism and the “Triumph” of Post-Pubescence

Sarah Gleeson-White argues that Carson McCullers's fiction is “particularly fertile” for an investigation into new understandings of gender and sexuality, “written as it was in the 1940s and 1950s, a time of tension between the changing status of women and the southern ideal of womanhood; between a growing liberalism on the one hand and segregation and repressive

sexual mores on the other” (*Strange Bodies* 2).⁸ More specifically, this “time of tension” included questions about women’s role in war, and about the new iconicity of the bride – a figure that was becoming a consumer touchstone in this period.⁹ Others have commented on the American obsession with “freaks” that was endemic to the period immediately preceding World War II – an obsession which, as Thomas Fahy argues, can be linked to concerns over an eroding line between the heterosexual and the homosexual.¹⁰ *Member*’s plot certainly calls out for such multifaceted analyses: it focuses on white Southern tomboy Frankie Addams, who spends her time thinking about her brother’s upcoming wedding and grappling with the prospects of growing up and adopting age-, gender-, and race-appropriate behaviors – prospects that make her worry that she is “queer” or “freakish.” She does so in the company of a motley crew that includes a much younger person, her feminine six-year-old cousin John Henry, and a much older person, the Addams family’s middle-aged black cook Berenice.

Much of this contemporary critical work has focused on how *Member* sympathetically depicts bodies that exceed normative boundaries, and affiliations exceed heteronormative institutions such as the monogamous intraracial marriage.¹¹ For example, Gleeson-White produces a feminist reading that accounts for Frankie’s particular position, calling the female adolescent body “a ... site of *becoming* which challenges the very notion of ‘female limits’” (*Strange Bodies* 8).¹² Elizabeth Freeman has argued in *The Wedding Complex* (2002) that *Member*, particularly in its open ending, resists stable identities and desires. Such accounts are invaluable particularly for their modification of early readings that ignored the issue of gender – grouping *Member* unproblematically along with male coming-of-age novels such as *Huck Finn*.¹³ But the relationship between classical narrative and the body has gone largely unmentioned in these accounts. I argue that, when we grapple with the novel’s presentation of

this relationship, we can grasp the very means by which those “female [and human] limits” are imposed, and better understand both the text’s structure and its frequent troping of time and vision. This chapter therefore argues for the importance of the uniquely-twentieth century discourse of adolescent development, and the enduring powers of classical narrative structure, to *Member*’s content, form, and milieu.

The discourse of developmentalism had been well-established by Western experts across multiple fields by the time *Member* was published. Though many specific aspects of “adolescence” have been refined over the decades, developmentalism has retained the emphasis on periodization and progress characteristic of *fin de siècle* Western modernity.¹⁴ Adolescence has, moreover, remained the second term in a tertiary scheme – both determined and causal, inevitable and crucial. To wit: in his definitive volume, *Adolescence* (1904), which essentially invented the concept, G. Stanley Hall that claimed individuals undergo a “a new birth” (xiii) after childhood, “a period of transformation so all-determining for future life to which it alone can often give the key” (589). In 1969, Gerald Caplan and Serge Lebovici’s *Adolescence: Psychosocial Perspectives* called adolescence “an expectable transitional phase of upset between the relatively stable psychological worlds of childhood and adult life.” The overall developmental schema, as they describe it, consists of “a move through the psychosocial equilibrium of the child within his family through a phase of inevitable developmental disturbance to adult independence” (1). In 1991, anthropologists Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry called adolescence “a social stage in all human societies, intervening between nonreproductive childhood and reproductive adulthood” (198).

Several salient points stand out here. Adolescence is imagined to be unique in terms of its dynamic properties. Human development is broadly periodized into three and only three

significant stages (childhood-adolescence-adulthood, also conceived of as beginning-middle-end, or stasis-disequilibrium-stasis). And this schema is linear and teleological in nature, emphasizing the endpoint of a well-adjusted, reproductive (read: heterosexual) adulthood. We cannot, of course, deny certain facts that theorists of adolescence work with, such as that infants cannot reproduce because they have not undergone particular biological processes. But I am galvanized by William Ayers's claim that "puberty is a fact; everything surrounding that fact is fiction" (ix) – fiction that indicates to us what twentieth-century Western culture cherishes most. For example, we might ask why these descriptions never consider post-reproductive adult life, not to mention *non-reproductive* adult life. The answer, I venture, is that if heterosexual reproductivity is the idealized telos of human development, no room remains in the story for, say, menopause, despite *its* undeniable existence. To take another example, we might be skeptical of the idea that *only* adolescence is a time of turmoil or crisis. As social historian Michael Mitterauer argues, "in the light of the accelerated pace of social change, [we must ask] whether this static view of adult roles can still be maintained" (240).¹⁵

Despite such objections, early ideas about adolescence and its place in the larger picture of human development have persisted as "natural facts" throughout the twentieth century and beyond. I argue that they have done so because they have been articulated through basic understandings of narrative dynamics, dynamics that are central to how we apprehend our world and impart information – and which, because of their efficiency in achieving these tasks, go uninterrogated. *Member*, in turn, critically exposes classical narrative form as a means of constructing "knowledge" about human bodies, about how and why they develop. Consider, for example, how Edward Branigan's general definition of narrative resonates with the human developmental schema: he states that narrative is "a way of organizing spatial and temporal data

into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end that embodies a judgment about the nature of events” (3). Transformation and disequilibrium, so central to the concept of adolescence, are also central to basic narrative dynamics. Tzvetan Todorov’s highly influential work deems “the category of transformation fundamental for a grammar of narrative” (224), while D.A. Miller notes that “the ‘narratable’ is a ‘disequilibrium ... and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise’” (as quoted in Martin 85). It might make sense, then, to deem our concept of adolescence a “kernel,” what Seymour Chatman defines as a “narrative momen[t] that give[s] rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events.” As he elaborates, “[kernels] are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths” (53).

Puberty, that subset of adolescence which directly contributes to the latter’s status as a narrative kernel, deserves brief consideration here. Writing of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) in *Come as You Are* (1996), Judith Roof argues that this monumental work both posits sexuality in narrative terms and posits narrative dynamics in sexual terms. But perhaps more pertinent for our purposes, Roof also notes that Freud locates the sexual instinct prior to puberty:

The real problem with the story [that has the sexual instinct kick in at puberty] is that it is a completely unsatisfying narrative, going from nothing to something without threat, risk, conflict, impediment, or motive. Without the possibility that something might go wrong [in human development], the saving force of heterosexual attraction means nothing. (xix)

While I find the tenor of Freud’s commentary much less hegemonic in spirit than Roof allows for, the *Essays* nonetheless indicate that much rides on a given individual’s proper conditioning by the time of puberty. As Freud describes it,

The final outcome of sexual development lies in what is known as the normal sexual life of the adult, in which the pursuit of pleasure comes under the sway of the reproductive function and in which the component instincts, under the primacy of a single erotogenic zone, form a firm organization directed towards a sexual aim attached to some extraneous sexual object. (63, my emphasis)

Moreover,

At the same time as ... plainly incestuous phantasies are overcome and repudiated, one of the most significant, but also one of the most painful, psychological achievements of the pubertal period is completed: detachment from parental authority, a process that alone makes possible the opposition, *which is so important for the progress of civilization,* between the new generation and the old. At every stage *in the course of development through which all beings ought by rights to pass,* a certain number are held back. (93, my emphasis)

Puberty, in Roof's account of Freud, is not (just) the moment at which normality is confirmed, but a moment at which the presence of the perversions potentially makes for a triumphant, dynamic, and dramatic story: that of the properly-developed human. Looking closely at the *Essays*, we see that they actually take careful note of the sacrifices often made on the path to normality. But this work, nonetheless, maintains that the potential for detours constructs that end-point of normality as a triumph from the standpoint of civilization and posterity.¹⁶

The fact that *Member's* protagonist, Frankie, does not readily embrace those processes of adjustment thus seems totally conventional at first; it seems to lay the groundwork for a great triumph of normality. Thus, while many critics describe Frankie as being awkward, grotesque, or liminal (or awkward and grotesque *because* liminal),¹⁷ we have to recognize that

these states do not, in and of themselves, signify a crisis in the cultural imagination. After all, to be on the cusp of a “force[d] ... movement into one of two (or more) possible paths,” to adapt Chatman’s phrasing, makes for a necessary grotesqueness that contributes to the “dramatic arc” of human development. The novel cites this grotesqueness on several levels. While the dominant social order expects femininity of her due to her female body, Frankie continues to be masculine in both behavior and appearance (sometimes as an apparent matter of protest, other times due to poor execution of social norms). She also has no interest in boys or in the idea of motherhood. And the majority of her affections accrue not to heterosexual or even homosexual object choices, but to the idea of her brother’s wedding. Great expectations are thereby built up for Frankie to renounce androgyny and come into womanhood; to reject polymorphous perversity and attach to a single, human object-choice; and to consolidate undifferentiated sexual energy and move into reproductivity. The fact that, by the novel’s end, Frankie has not clearly succeeded at any of the above is only one way in which *Member* queers developmentalism. In exposing developmentalism’s narrative operations, and the requirements for bodies they establish, the novel also excavates Frankie and the adolescent state she represents from a literally pivotal position; from being conceived of as poised, by definition, to swing forward toward a predetermined future state.

Vision and Revision: Problems of Narrativity in *Member*

One of the first things a reader might notice about Frankie is that she has a strange relationship to narrative acts. Besides evincing difficulty with visualizing future events – when she thinks of her brother at his wedding, “there [is] was a brightness where his face should be,” and his bride is “faceless” (4); she also has trouble narrativizing, ordering past events in a comprehensible way.¹⁸ In *The Content of the Form* (1987), Hayden White remarks upon the

proper execution of such acts, claiming, “narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are [believed to be] generally human rather than culture-specific” (1). But this “solution” and its supposed universalism are not necessarily benign. White suggests that such interventions work in the service of, even while they make invisible, dominant ideology. As he summarizes, “narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality” (14) – to inflect it with a sense of what is “right” and “wrong,” “valuable” and “dispensable,” in the culture at hand.

Frankie’s deficiencies thus throw that “moralize[d] reality” under scrutiny, and expose the constructedness of even the spontaneous narratives we tell. But perhaps more importantly, these deficiencies also prompt us to question just how “generally human” classical narrative form is. Whereas, as I have shown, adolescence is considered to be inherently dynamic, and pivotal to the developmental narrative, McCullers’s novel troubles that assumption first by showing us an adolescent who cannot “do” narrative dynamism in the ideological sense. This fact becomes most apparent in the scenes where Frankie asks Berenice to tell the story of events that she herself has already witnessed. For example, in the novel’s first section, Frankie says, “tell me ... tell me exactly how it was” (28). (Just as with the first sentence of the novel, we have an unclear referent here in the word “it” – a point to which I will return to later on.) Berenice protests, “*You know!* ... *You seen them*” (28, my emphasis), a protest that simultaneously invokes and throws into question that supposedly “natural” human capacity for narrativizing. But Frankie insists on hearing a rendition of “it.” Berenice acquiesces, and

launches into the most straightforward narrative description in the whole novel – only then giving us a sense of what “it” refers to:

Your brother and the bride come late this morning and you and John Henry hurried in from the back yard to see them. The next thing I realize you busted back through the kitchen and run up to your room. You came down with your organdie dress on and lipstick an inch thick from one ear to the next. ... Then after dinner your brother and the bride took the three-o'clock train back to Winter Hill. The wedding will be this coming Sunday. And that is all. (28)

Berenice's rendition illuminates both narrative and social norms. This story, *Member's* most straight-forward story, “ends” with a straight union. Of course, the wedding itself has not yet taken place. But Berenice's settling on its future facticity as an end point suggests the ways in which the heterosexual marriage plot has long provided literature, and the “real world,” with a governing telos. Allison Pingree's work on *Member* draws on Joseph Boone to remind us that “the ‘concept of romantic wedlock’ ... has been, conventionally, the novel's ‘symbolic center and ideal end’” (77). Moreover, in 1946, at the time of *Member's* publication, the wedding had taken on renewed social significance because it militated against particular cultural developments of that era, including white middle-class women's entrance into the workforce, and mounting activism on the part of gays and lesbians. The wedding, we might say, was shorthand for the “ideal end” of heteroreproductive adulthood. Thus, Berenice's realist account of events, delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, actually belies its ideological status. “The wedding will be this coming Sunday. And that is all” is a loaded articulation of what life stories are expected to look like in general, and in *Member's* particular moment, and of how life stories

“should” end. And it is a loaded articulation of the fact that those entering adulthood should already know these things. One should be able to “see” such things “as a picture,” and eventually make that picture into a reality for oneself.

It is ironic, of course, to find Frankie seeking the vision of someone who would not be considered an authority in the segregationist South. Berenice is black, poor, female, unmarried (having been married previously four times, with no children), and disabled – literally half-blind, whereas Frankie is figuratively blind, unable to visualize or imagine. In the post-adolescent social order that Frankie is theoretically about to enter, blacks who have been authority figures or even peers for white children will be their inferiors. Moreover, in this social order, white females are supposed to stop being tomboys, and are supposed to pair off with white men.¹⁹ A striking dialectic is hereby set up: in seeking Berenice’s renditions, Frankie indicates resistance to the very social order that those renditions clarify for her. And Frankie, we must remember, seeks these renditions because she cannot perform them herself. This inability alienates her from the narrative economy that determines which values, and by extension, which bodies, matter. But, we must note, it also allows her to escape the dynamism and determinism central to narrative itself. She has not internalized the conventions that allow us to “know” that B follows A, or, say, to “know” that reproductive adulthood follows from puberty. And all things being equal to her, Frankie cannot identify where particular events “must” go in a particular story, or what they “must” mean. This sense of the necessary is what allows endings like marriage and adulthood to appear both inevitable and natural. And these naturalized endings, in turn, confirm adolescence as a crucial turning point.

The “Non-Futurist” Adolescent?

But Frankie is not just a recalcitrant narrativist. The text actually treats her adolescent

body, as we will see momentarily, as one that forestalls narrative dynamism. She is a stunning paradox on both conceptual and somatic levels, then: a “non-dynamic,” “non-futurist” adolescent, when the adolescent is dynamic and futurist by definition. While we have been told that Frankie is twelve years old, we have not been told much at all about the materiality of her body. This is unique, first, in that all of the other major characters receive sustained physical descriptions,²⁰ and second, in that the adolescent body is so frequently the focus of coming-of-age novels, not to mention medical and cultural discourses. The few descriptions of Frankie that the novel *does* contain tend to be framed through other characters’ opinions of her, laden with overtly metaphorical language, or blatantly tinged with value judgments. For example, the narrator states that “she was grown *so* tall that she was almost a *big freak* ... her legs *too* long” (4, my emphasis); her “reflection in the glass was warped and crooked” (4), and, similarly, she “looked at her ugly dark mug in the mirror” (40). In these moments, McCullers’s text stresses to us that the adolescent body’s apparently neutral, discrete status is anything but. When we “see” it, we are usually seeing it refracted through particular lenses – quite literally here, in the case of the mirror.

The narrator also never alludes to any of the other somatic changes believed to be involved in puberty, several of which Norman Kiell has catalogued as frequently appearing in coming-of-age novel²¹ – including breast development; the growth of pubic hair or body hair; the onset of menstruation; the increased activity of the perspiratory glands, and the widening of the hips. And Frankie never properly performs those social rituals that normally accompany physical changes, such as falling in love or losing her virginity. In short, puberty in the novel is invoked not by the actual *appearance* of bodily changes, but by *expectations for* those changes – the social expectations of those around Frankie, and, perhaps, the readerly expectations sparked

by the fact that *Member* centers on a girl of a certain age. The novel thereby both reminds us of and resists the fact that the adolescent is always reduced to her bodily prospects, rendering all of her vicissitudes part of a larger, predetermined story. McCullers does not, in turn, attempt to give us direct access to Frankie's "real" body, but in fact troubles that very notion – making us aware of how the far-reaching discourse of developmentalism has trained us to read bodies in specific, yet seemingly non-ideological, ways.

Beyond eliding the typical somatic events of puberty, we might say that the text actually replaces these events with ones that are external to the body.²² For example, Katherine Davis claims that Frankie's "bewilderment [about her social ostracism] manifests itself in an extreme paranoia about her body" (40), but when Frankie worries, "I think they have been spreading it all over town that I smell bad," we find out that it is not, say, the increased perspiration that comes with puberty that is in question; she continues, "when I had those boils and had to use that black bitter-smelling ointment, old Helen Fletcher asked me what was that funny smell I had" (12). Smells and substances do not here portend adulthood, but actually mark Frankie's rejection from the mature social order. In fact, her *reactions* to such rejections also involve imposed and artificial, rather than organic, bodily changes. For example, Frankie constantly douses herself with the femininely-named "Sweet Serenade" perfume. In such moments, we understand that nothing "natural" or "internal" necessarily situates Frankie on the threshold of adulthood. Rather, meaning is imputed to her body by external forces, be they objects or human beings.

The text thereby leaves us skeptical of the "facts" of puberty and adolescence. Pubertal transformations and their connection to adulthood begin to look less like biological certainties than disparate events knitted into narrative form by normative ideology. Which is not to say that

pubertal transformations can never be “queer,” defying definitive structure or hegemonic meaning. Indeed, they might be quite so, in resisting assimilation into that narrative form. In short, while it is impossible to stop a pubescent female body from undergoing certain somatic processes, at least in 1946, *Member* shows us that it *is* possible to refuse to employ those transformations as the building blocks of a coherent narrative, one leading to the end of heterosexual, reproductive womanhood. And in refusing us these cues to forward movement, McCullers approaches a seemingly-impossible project: presenting a female whose body that doesn’t have to “mean” womanhood (with its attendant ideals of fertility, racial purity, and so forth), and an adolescent whose body doesn’t have to “mean” *anything*, even in the face of developmentalist standards. Of course, those standards deeply pervade and influence everyday thinking, a fact perhaps best exemplified by the comments of one early critic who claimed that McCullers’s characters were not “rounded people,” “not quite human” (Dangerfield 32).

In his work on narrative theory and Darwinism, Franco Moretti calls for increased attention to narrative elements that simply do not generate narrative momentum. For example, of the monologue, he states, “[it] is indeed determined by the plot, but it doesn’t contribute to it. It has a syntagmatic position, but no syntagmatic function. And it is precisely this lack of function which accounts for the wonderful flexibility of tragic monologues” (275). The changes of adolescence, of course, are never considered in terms of “wonderful flexibility.” Architects of adolescence such as Hall insist that even such changes as increased height point nowhere else than toward reproductive adulthood. Moreover, there is never any sense in the literature of developmentalism that a body might simply *not* pass through puberty-and-adolescence. But Moretti, fascinatingly, points us to an oft-ignored notion of non-teleology within evolutionary theory:

Once evolution has been freed from teleology ... perfection becomes even more enigmatic: an organ which is ten per cent of a wing makes sense as a first step in the project of constructing a wing, but if such a project does not exist, of what use could it ever be? ... Darwin's answer was that 'an organ originally constructed for one purpose ... may be converted into one for a wholly different purpose,' and a few years ago Stephen Jay Gould and Elizabeth Vrba proposed to call such organs 'exaptations.'" (274)

By refusing to insist upon adolescence as a dynamic, futurist, or otherwise narrative-friendly phenomenon, *Member* creates a conceptual space in which pubertal events could be considered exaptive. Their purpose is not predetermined, and not knowable in advance. The import of such a move for bodies of all stripes is immense. The existence of, say, menstruation for a female who will choose not to bear children, does not necessarily stand as evidence of deviance, in either the narrative sense of veering away from an engineered end, or in the social sense of violating norms – senses that, as I have been sketching out, are deeply interrelated. And nor do such bodily developments need to appear useless or wasteful. We might simply imagine an alternative scenario in which, say, a non-reproductive female could find menstruation useful indeed, for some purposes we might never imagine. At the same time, less obviously-sexual or -reproductive transformations such as increased height can be liberated from the magnetic pull of the developmental narrative.

Member's vision of the non-futurist, non-dynamic, and exaptive adolescent body also participates in the kind of non-identitarian queerness recently described by queer theorists. Lee Edelman argues that

Where futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing that gap, queerness undoes the identities

through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed. (25)

Rachel Adams, likewise, notes that McCullers's imagined worlds actually converge with "post-homosexual" contemporary theoretical positions. She catalogues the author's frequent use of the term "queer," claiming that it indexes such theoretical positions: "the term *homosexuality* does not adequately capture the wide array of erotic identifications and groupings that appear among [McCullers's] characters." In contrast to queer, then, "homosexuality" "rarely appears in her work" (555). If we consider the supposedly liminal position of the adolescent, this favoring of "queer" appears rather striking. Rejecting the forward-moving sociobiological narrative might also entail rejecting *all* definitive adult identities that could be used to impose order and meaning upon otherwise unruly lives and bodies – even "homosexual" or "lesbian." Such moves further define *Member* as a late modernist, verging on postmodernist, text: it circumvents the stable ontology of "homosexual" *as well as* the stable ontology of (straight, white) "adult," even as the former was only just emerging as the alternative to the latter.²³

Beginnings, Middles, and Ends: Tripartite Structures and Narrative Parody

Member bears a striking interest in sets of threes. Most prominently, Frankie spends the majority of her time with Berenice and John Henry, who form a rather queer trinity. They have occasional gatherings in which "the three of them would sit there at the kitchen table and criticize the Creator and the work of God. Sometimes their voices crossed and the three worlds twisted. The Holy Lord God John Henry West. The Holy Lord God Berenice Sadie Brown. The Holy Lord God Frankie Addams" (98). The novel also abounds with other, seemingly meaningless references to threes, including that "when [Frankie] was a little girl she believed that three ghosts were living in the coal house" (8); she has stolen a "three-bladed knife from the

Sears and Roebuck store” (123); she has had her name appear in the paper three times (148); she finds herself “three blocks from the train station” while running away (152), and so on. Many of these sets of threes suggest, as have many critics, that Frankie’s imaginative and affective affiliations involve trios rather than duos. Freeman and Adams, for example, have claimed that Frankie’s desire to join with Jarvis and Janice evidences McCullers’s critique of socially-sanctioned modes of affiliation, those that insist on monogamous heterosexual pairing as the ultimate form of existence. But *Member*’s employment of threes extends beyond images and numeric references, to include linguistic markers and the structure of the text itself – thereby allowing McCullers to parody the beginnings-middles-ends schema that drives both classical narrative form and the trajectory of the ideal body, and which positions adolescence as that dynamic kernel in the middle.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator introduces our protagonist as “Frankie,” and the other characters accordingly refer to her as such. Part II begins with the narrator’s direct reference to this protagonist as “F. Jasmine,” a name Frankie has mentioned briefly in Part I.²⁴ This second section includes a scene of her putting her new name on visiting cards, and the narrator’s oblique statement that “it was the old Frankie of yesterday who had been puzzled, but F. Jasmine did not wonder any more” (50). Our protagonist’s name abruptly changes again, and with even less forewarning, in Part III, which begins with the narrator referring to her as “Frances.” In including a letter to Mr. Addams signed “Frances,” this section suggests that this, too, has been Frankie’s choice of name change.²⁵ By “going along” with Frankie’s name changes, the text at first seems to endorse these changes. But at the same time, a humorous dissonance is created through the abrupt, matter-of-fact manner in which it presents such major shifts – changing our protagonist’s name two different times without carefully setting us up for

these shifts, and rigidly adhering to the same new name within each new section. Moreover, the tripartite structure these shifts instantiate – that of beginning (Frankie)-middle (F. Jasmine)-end (Frances), which coincide with the novel’s Part I, Part II, and Part III – appears overwrought, even cartoonish, in its rigid segmentation.²⁶ The traditional insistence upon clear and meaningful divisions between the three stages of life, and between one’s role within each, here comes under parodic scrutiny.

Of course, these name changes might be read by some as upholding the narratological/developmental imperative of forward movement, and endorsing tripartite conceptual structures.²⁷ But the names themselves defy such a conclusion. For example, while “F. Jasmine” marks Frankie’s interest in aligning herself with the impending heterosexual union, Constante González Groba notes that the name “follows the largely male convention of using a first and a middle name, and on the visiting cards that she makes for herself she adds *Esq.* to her new name” (139). Lori J. Kenschaft has also argued that, while “‘Frances’ may be less aggressively boyish than ‘Frankie,’” as well as more formal, “it is nevertheless androgynous when spoken” (228). The figure at the novel’s end is, thus, not necessarily female-identified. Moreover, although some critics have referred to Frances as Frankie’s “real name,”²⁸ the text bears no evidence for that claim. We might therefore imagine that Frankie herself may have chosen to adopt the androgynous “Frances,” indicating an active, ultimate refusal to be subsumed into heteronormative adult structures.²⁹

The futurist energies of Frankie’s name changes are also forestalled throughout the novel. The narrator’s claim that “it was the old Frankie of yesterday who had been puzzled, but F. Jasmine did not wonder any more” (50) proves disingenuous at such moments as her perplexing accident of vision, which I discuss below, and her disastrous attempt at heterosexual courtship,

which finds her fleeing a date with a coarse, drunken soldier. In sum, then, Frankie's name changes do not reflect development toward mature, conformist ends, but, rather, mark her failure to secure those ends. And in their excessiveness, these name changes highlight the machinations behind normativity and narrativity – the labor that goes into trying to make lives appear ordered, and into the construction of supposedly-natural “human development.” We might, by that token, also say that name changes stand in for *somatic* changes within *Member*'s world – shifting focus away from the “inevitability” of the latter type of changes, and their assumed purposes. That is, while in “normal” development, a name change might accompany maturation, it certainly is not understood to *supplant* it. And yet *Member* presents us with that scenario, steering clear of describing or otherwise validating those somatic events that we would assume constitute one's induction into womanhood. This protagonist's name changes are thus as excessive in another sense: they stage development instead of coinciding with it – they are performances, rather than markers, of growth and change.³⁰

While the novel's three sections are literally and ideologically connected to Frankie's name changes, these sections also perform (rather than mark) change *on their own*, further parodying developmentalism. For one thing, the novel's middle section is the longest at 90 pages, compared to the 44 of the first and the 20 of the third. This fact coincides, whether intentionally or not, with the heightened status of adolescence in the twentieth century. As the kernel in the developmental narrative, it occupies a great deal of space in the cultural as well as the literary imagination. It is no coincidence, after all, that Part II is where we find the narrator's comment that “that day alone seemed equally important as both the long past and the bright future – as a hinge is important to a swinging door” (61).

This middle section is also further subdivided into three parts, mirroring how

adolescence, itself the middle term in a tripartite structure, is believed to encapsulate the tripartite substructure of early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. As William Wattenberg (1955) states, in a chapter titled “What is Special About Adolescence?”, “most young people as we see them in Western cultures seem to go through *three distinct stages or phases during their second decade of life*” (1). However, in addition to seeing F. Jasmine emotionally deflated in this middle section, the narrator actually describes the afternoon depicted in Part II as being “like the center of the cake that Berenice had baked last Monday ... with the edges risen light and high and the middle moist and altogether fallen” (75). While parodying adolescence’s idealized liminality and promise through structure, the novel now employs an image that explicitly frames “the middle” as limp rather than portentous or dynamic – thereby inverting how we think of the midpoint of classical narratives and of human development. If we consider the contents of the novel overall, in fact, we see that *Member* is structured as an inversion of the classical narrative and developmental schema of stasis-disequilibrium-stasis. Part I finds Frankie in a state of confusion and disequilibrium; Part II finds her (attempting to put herself) in a state of meaning and stasis; and Part III, as I discuss later, finds her back in a state of confusion and disequilibrium.

Part III, the shortest of the novel’s three sections, also provides us with an invocation and critique of cultural/literary treatments of the “end point” of heterosexual, reproductive adulthood. While arrival at this point is venerated, it holds little of the drama that adolescence, by definition, does. Thus, as critics such as Freeman and Rachel Blau Duplessis have shown,³¹ traditional novels that employ such devices as the marriage plot end right after, and sometimes even before, the actual wedding. Life as a heteroreproductive adult is considered much less interesting, not to mention much less generative and dynamic from a narratological standpoint, than the fraught

journey that preferably points toward that life. This is not least of all because that ideal end is *expected*, though of course it is also anxiously hoped for by many a suspense-bound reader, or adolescent, or parent. The slightness of *Member's* end section – which, of course, follows a wedding – wryly registers these facts.

That “Wedding Feeling”: Performing Proper Narrativization

Frankie's problems with vision and narrativizing appear largely solved at the beginning of the novel's second section. Indeed, it seems as if the “non-futurist,” anti-identitarian adolescent might only be a brief ideological experiment on McCullers's part. To wit: at the very end of Part I, Frankie has decided that she will become a part of her brother's marriage, telling John Henry, “I love the two of them so much. We'll go to every place together;” having declared this, Frankie “opened her eyes” (46). Having thus become part (or so she believes) of that ever-important plot device, the wedding, Frankie spends at least half of the proceeding section wandering around town under that new name “F. Jasmine,” and experiencing her newfound powers of vision and narrativization. But her harnessing of these powers plants the seeds of disillusionment in her and in us, the readers. The text hereby suggests narrativity to be not “a solution to a problem of general concern,” to paraphrase White, but a potential problem in and of itself.

The narrator imputes a basic narrative structure to F. Jasmine's life at this point, stating, “her world seemed layered in three different parts, all the twelve years of the old Frankie, the present day itself, and the future ahead when the ... three of them would be together in all the many distant places.” Indeed, as I have noted, the narrator comments in this section that “that day alone seemed equally important as both the long past and the bright future – as a hinge is important to a swinging door” (61). This description reads like a brief on how to construct a

proper dramatic narrative arc – *make it dynamic through a kernel (a “hinge”), and make it tie past, present, and future together*. F. Jasmine at first exudes great pleasure in this, in how her self-insertion into the wedding apparently enables her to perform life-narrativity to the letter, and to access the related benefits. She effusively tells strangers on the street about her plans, feeling as if “the telling of the wedding had an end and a beginning, a shape like a song” (62). This concept of shape appears elsewhere in the novel, especially around Frankie’s bodily neuroses. She is terrified of her rapid growth and she figures that “according to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a freak” (19). Interestingly enough, she directly associates heterosexual marriage with giving definition not just to one’s life story but to one’s *body* – indicating the inseparability of narrativity and proper embodiment in the cultural imagination. As she asks Berenice at one point, “does marrying really stop your growth?” (27). While the question on the one hand represents a fantastic misunderstanding, as does her belief that she can form a triad with Jarvis and Janice, it also constitutes an astute insight: what we expect of bodies biologically (puberty, reproductivity, even height) depends heavily on what we expect of bodies socially (marriage, heterosexuality) – *and not just vice versa*. That is, Frankie actually voices the idea that the narrative of developmentalism maps social expectations onto the body, though she at first misunderstands this mapping as something harmless, something maybe even coincident with “natural” formation.

But almost as soon as F. Jasmine begins enjoying her newfound position, the narrator begins alluding to its problematic nature. After recounting her story to multiple people, she finds that “the plans about the wedding stiffened and fixed with each new telling and finally came unchangeable. By eleven-thirty she was very tired” (64). This “stiff,” “fixed” nature is notably

different from the open-ended, faceless vision of the bride and groom that Frankie initially had. While the induction into narrativity at first looked promising, as did the idea of joining up with Jarvis and Janice, both soon begin to look stifling and, somewhat paradoxically, non-dynamic. The narrative formula that F. Jasmine harnesses – that alleged “solution,” and allegedly natural human capacity – is revealed as a problem precisely because it *is* a formula. It is rigid, prescriptive in both senses of the term, and it cannot be changed to accommodate certain kinds of people or to allow for different kinds of bodies, such as non-heteronormative or non-futurist ones.

The same sad rigidity that accrues to her idea of the wedding reappears in a more traumatic context later in the same section. A mere thirty minutes after her plans for the wedding began to feel “stiffened,” F. Jasmine meets a soldier who shows sexual interest in her. Immediately, she finds that “the noon air was thick and sticky as hot syrup, and there was the stifling smell of the dye-rooms from the cotton mill” (70). Despite this foreboding sensation, she makes a date with the soldier for later, at which time she accompanies him to his motel room. Even before he attempts to have sex with her,³² the novel’s descriptions figure this heterosexual pairing as an almost dead-end trap, a space of decay rather than generation. His room is initially described as “hard and very ugly,” and has little in it except for a “half-eaten package of cinnamon rolls covered with blue-white icing and fat flies” (135).

F. Jasmine’s (attempted) induction into the heterosexual economy can be read as the foreclosing of “a fluidity of identities” (Matlock-Zieman 134) – a foreclosing, we might say, of queerness. But it also has particular narrative implications. First, by figuring such an induction not just as discomfiting but as violent and even deadly, the text thus renders usually-productive, -catalytic moments such as sexual awakening as oblitative. They appear as the destruction of

meaning rather than part of the framework for producing it. Herein, a notable twist on Edelman's argument appears. Instead of implying that queerness destroys meaning from the standpoint of classical narrative form, *Member* looks *from the standpoint of queerness* at how classical narrative destroys other possible forms of meaning. Relatedly, the idea of having a recognizable, definable life begins to look much less like an ideal telos – for either fiction or “real life” – than something to be escaped. To that end, Frankie actually *does* escape: assaulting the soldier and fleeing the motel, she avoids consummating an act that has enormous socio-narrative implications, an act that, in the cultural imagination, would move her closer to womanhood and, potentially, reproductivity, thereby making “sense” of her body.

We must be careful not to read these moves as simple rejections of heterosexuality. As Kenschaft terms it, “McCullers's texts challenge the *supremacy* of heterosexual romance” (229, my emphasis). Therefore, “the important point is not whether people [in McCullers's texts] use their [potential] freedom to form homosexual relationships. Rather, these texts present a fundamental critique of a society built around heterosexual couplings and procreative families” (230). In fact, if we take notice of the text's frequent critiques of narrativization and future-looking, we can understand F. Jasmine's growing disillusionment with her idea of her brother's wedding and her rejection of the soldier as much more than anti-heterosexuality, *and* as something more complex than, say, a growing lesbian identity. It is a critical grappling with the imperatives of narrative-bodily dynamism: though initially pleased with the prospect of forward movement and connection that the wedding and her date with the soldier potentially afford her, F. Jasmine and, through her, the reader, come to suspect that the value system that stresses such affiliations (and not just the affiliations *themselves*) closes off possibilities and calcifies bodies in unbearable ways. F. Jasmine may, in other words, feel acutely the “strangeness of the adolescent

experience in terms of the changing body, sexual anxiety, and social demands for conformity” (Gleeson-White, “Revisiting”), but she might find more disturbing the fact that a particularly *unstrange* or “*unqueer*” future has been pre(-)scripted for that adolescent body.

Narrative Repressions

Through F. Jasmine, *Member* goes on to more explicitly illustrate the exclusionary powers of narrativizing. Returning to White, we see that *Member* further scrutinizes the “moralized reality” that the act of narrativizing so often establishes. Specifically, as White and others have suggested,³³ while this act imposes on events the shape of a story, this very imposition covers up its own operations. When presented in narrative form, events appear as if they have simply been laid bare, been reported without intervention, judgment, elision, simplification, minimization, or emphases. In short, not only is this act not necessarily benign, but its ability to *appear* benign by *not appearing like anything at all* is rather troubling. *Member* makes this claim through Frankie/F. Jasmine’s obsession with the institution of the wedding, which leads her to reject other concurrent events as irrelevant. To wit: when her cousin’s great-uncle dies, the narrator reports, “an old, old man, he had been sick a long time ... Now he was dead. But that had nothing to do with the wedding, and so F. Jasmine only said: ‘Poor Uncle Charles. That certainly is a pity’” (65). Later, when she finds out that Uncle Charles’s funeral means that her cousin and Berenice will attend the wedding, the narrator states, “now that she knew the death of Uncle Charles would in a sense affect the wedding, she made room for it in her thoughts” (76). It is no wonder that Frankie has wanted to hitch herself to the wedding: such events dictate the shape of dominant narratives, harness public attention, and validate individual existence – facts that she may be all the more aware of, in that she herself has been both a hopeful and failed narrativist.

What is ironic, of course, is that Frankie does not understand at first that marriages are constituted by two individuals. As Pingree states, “Frankie ... learns the hard way that two is the conventional quantity of romance and that she, a third ‘party,’ is indeed a ‘crowd,’ an unnecessary surplus” (85). But she is not just a social remainder in the division that marriage constitutes. She is a narrative remainder within the plot that events like the wedding dictate. She must be left out because there is no room for three, but also because, even as part of a dyad, she could not advance the plot. She would make for an incestuous pairing with her brother and a queer pairing with her brother’s fiancée, combinations that have no social future as well as no reproductive future. We might say here that an end, the wedding, has managed to triumph over a protagonist, instead of the classical narrative formula that finds a protagonist triumphing over an obstacle to reach an end. While this setup is a certain tragedy from Frankie’s point of view, it also allows the text to further stress that classical narrative logic can suppress or even oppress non-conforming actors. Frankie, then, is another curiosity on the order of the “non-futurist” adolescent. She is a character in a narrative who grapples with narrative itself, in its most prevailing “real-life” forms.

Michael Warner’s 1999 queer theory work, *The Trouble with Normal*, discusses the discriminating powers of marriage in a contemporary Western context – discriminating powers that *Member* shows to be most forcefully articulated through narrative form. Warner argues, “even though people think that marriage gives them validation, legitimacy, and recognition, they somehow think that it does so without invalidating, delegitimizing, or stigmatizing other relations, needs, and desires” (99). In *Member*’s milieu, it was well understood that marrying would, *precisely*, cordon one off from stigmatized lifestyles.³⁴ But Warner’s point stands. The wedding – as a pervasive novelistic device in general, as a cherished social telos, and as a focal

point for Frankie in particular – necessarily excludes and renders invisible a large swath of bodies, affiliations, and events. And it often does so so immediately, so primarily, that barely any trace of that cultural work can be comprehended.

One of *Member's* more puzzling scenes evokes this point. At a moment after F. Jasmine has become disillusioned about her brother's wedding, she experiences what the narrator terms an "accident," a "mysterious trick of sight and the imagination" (74), while walking alone. "There was something sideways and behind her that had flashed across the very corner edge of her left eye; she had half-seen something, a dark double shape." This "dark double shape" brings to mind her brother and his fiancée. F. Jasmine actually feels as if she has "caught a glimpse of them – although she knew ... that they were ... almost a hundred miles away" (75). When she tentatively looks closer, she is "stunned" to find "two colored boys, one taller than the other and with his arm resting on the shorter boy's shoulder" (75). The focus on faulty vision here reifies the elisions central to narrativizing, and their direct effect on bodies. And it ties those critiques back to the novel's unique take on adolescence. The narrow confines of the marriage plot imposed a particular value system on our adolescent protagonist's "sight and ... imagination" (74) – allowing her to see the "right" picture of the bride and groom, but preventing her from recognizing these abject figures for what they are. But this tunnel vision, in McCullers's hands, actually fails. And it shows itself to have failed its practitioner, F. Jasmine. What then appears are those figures and affiliations that are explicitly excluded from the ideal marriage, and the idealized marriage plot: non-white bodies, same-sex pairings, intergenerational pairs. This scene is perhaps most arresting to Frankie because of her direct implication in it. After all, it is not simply that the wedding excludes others, but that, in excluding *her*, it makes her the same kind of social detritus as the two here-to-fore unseen black boys, and dead Uncle Charles when he had

nothing to do with the wedding. I would argue, further, that this explains how gender and race could become so totally mixed up in this weird apparition. The appearance of the black boys constitutes an eruption of all the possible bodies that have been purged from, or never even considered within, the story of the properly-developed human being.

Alternative Plotting: Evasion and Analepsis

The Member of the Wedding itself makes discriminating choices, though with rather different effects. To begin with, it avoids what popular opinion would define as major events – leading many critics to claim that the novel contains little dramatic action. As George Dangerfield claimed in 1946, the novel shows three people “discoursing in what appears to be a dream or trance ... Nothing or almost nothing occurs” (31-2). Dangerfield’s “nothing” inadvertently indicates what he thinks counts as “something.” The wedding, for one thing, never appears in the novel *as an event* – a fact all the more notable in that the title seems to promise us a wedding. Neither the characters nor the narrator describe it in the present, and it is only obliquely referred to as a past event. All we get is the narrator’s brief summary at the beginning of the novel’s third section:

The wedding was like a dream ... from the moment when, sedate and proper, [Frankie] shook hands with the grown people until the time, the wrecked wedding over, when she watched the car with the two of them driving away from her, and flinging herself down in the sizzling dust, she cried out for the last time: “Take me! Take me!” (144)

Similarly, the meeting with the bride-and-groom-to-be that Berenice recounts to Frankie never appears first-hand as an event within the text; it is presented to the reader ex-post-facto by a socially marginal figure. We know, through this presentation and through various other means, that weddings are the “ideal ends.” But to not subsequently offer any direct treatment of such an

event, much less use it *as an end*, is a self-consciously queer response to classical narrative dictates. Like pubertal changes, the wedding is available as a narrative element, and yet left unemployed and untreated in the novel. Such avoidance constitutes more than simple critique: it renders these elements ostentatious extras, rather than “natural” necessities.

Further, *Member* frequently suspends recognition of major events or actions *as such*. We’ve already seen that Frankie’s request, “tell me exactly how *it* was,” is obscure to the reader until Berenice begins her recounting of the visit. More strikingly, the entire event on which the novel is premised is utterly vague. We are told in that very first sentence that “it happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old” (3), but what “*it*” refers to is never clarified. This pointed vagueness puts the reader into a zone of disorientation and limited knowledge, but it also wryly exposes the work necessary for certain events to stand out as the “meaningful” ones. Indeed, by not specifying, the text forces us to confront the values we impose on events. What are we moved to guess “*it*” is? In what ways do we find ourselves wanting to force the text to define “*it*”? In short, what do we believe matters? Whereas Frankie initially selected against Uncle Charles in her wedding-story, here we as readers face empty spaces that tempt us to select for and against various options.³⁵

The novel’s frequent deployment of analepsis also allows for a replotting of the developmental narrative. Gérard Genette, in establishing the term analepsis, defined it as “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment” (40). He categorizes analepsis as a kind of “anachrony”: a “for[m] of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative” (40). Through this device, the text formally opposes the narrative teleology that undergirds the concept of adolescence; as *Member*’s narration constantly “lapses” into the past, it counters the forward momentum

associated with both the figure of the adolescent and narrative itself. And as a tale of *adolescence*, *Member* in turn renders that state synchronic, discrete in space and time.

While most novels employ at least some analepsis, certain facts make *Member*'s use of the device unique and even extreme. First, both the narrator and the characters utilize it, making it an inescapable feature of the text. Not only does Berenice recount events, but we also have such moments as when the narrator begins one section with a mention of Frankie walking around town on a Saturday, only to revert twice to descriptions of the earlier part of that morning (50, 53). Second, the majority of *Member*'s analepsis is what Genette would call "internal," meaning that the recalled events have taken place within the temporal framework of the diegesis, not prior to when we initially "met" the characters. In a novel with external analepsis, one might find passages that refer to decades, years, or months prior to when the novel's action began. In *Member*, however, we find passages that refer back to only hours or even minutes prior, hours and minutes that have actually been touched upon previously in some way – such as when the narrator states, after having described part of a day, "It was still early in the morning when F. Jasmine left the house that day" (53). Moreover, the main temporal framework of *Member*, as a whole, consists of *only four days*. While analepsis normally functions to impart past information without covering the entirety of large expanses of time, here little time has actually elapsed. This odd use of analepsis actually makes it difficult upon first read to recognize *the very fact that* the novel take place over only four days. It thus frustrates the "normal" work of organizing data into a comprehensive schema – the same kind of work that developmentalism does; organizing disparate somatic and psychological events into a coherent story about the human body and its optimal capabilities.

Member's use of analepsis is often accompanied by vague causality, further confounding

classical narrative logic and its dynamic character. Consider, for example, the narrator's statement near the end that "there were the changes and Frances was now thirteen" (158). In the "gap" between Part II and Part III, the gap in which "F. Jasmine" somehow turned into "Frances," we missed out on directly seeing these changes. And we are now being told, retroactively, that they took place. The strange construction of "was now," which is neither past tense nor present tense alone, highlights the simultaneously matter-of-fact and odd ways in which the narrator expresses temporality. More notably, this strange construction refuses to assign any clear causal connection between the two data. McCullers's narrator makes "changes" and "thirteen" almost incidental concepts by using the conjunction "and." Notably, the preceding sentence, which refers to seasonality, is constructed in the same way: "Weathers had turned and it was in another season" (158). We don't even have the simple sense that Frankie, say, "turned thirteen," a phrase that would naturalize the movement from the prior age at which we met her, twelve, forward to an older age, thirteen. And no more does the syntax affirm our knowledge that particular weathers come with particular seasons; that they have any causal, rather than coincidental, connection.

Causality is further obfuscated through the syntax of *Member's* sentences. Two pages after first mentioning these "changes," the narrator states, "the changes had come about ... during the middle of October. Frances had met [her new friend] Mary at a raffle two weeks before" (160-1). "There were the changes" and "the changes had come about" appear at first to be, as analepsis usually is, attempts at retroactively filling in information. But the phrases themselves contain no information. And nor does their juxtaposition with other phrases produce or, *allow for*, a narrative, the way statements or images placed next to each other so often do. (If a story is to be made out of this data, it will require great effort, even violence, on the part of the

reader – labors that would not likely go unnoticed.) The novel does not circumscribe these changes – were they somatic? temporal? geographical? seasonal? sexual? educational? – and their referential context does point to a particular answer. Simply put, data and facts in *Member* just sit next to each other, defying any attempt at being linked together into a coherent story.

It is worth stressing that moves such as these, ones that offer vague causality and general disorientation, are performed by the narrator. This fact is obvious, yet crucial. *Member* does not simply show us the world through the eyes of a confused individual; a liminal child who sometimes wants to, but can't, find her proper place. It also provides us with an omniscient narrator who refuses to actually display or offer omniscience, defying the “realist” and scientific plane of knowledge through which we believe we can appraise human life in its supposed whole. The text thereby constructs an alternate epistemological field, one in which the reader is consistently refused access to, or confirmation of, the developmental paradigm, with all of its interest in prediction and incipience and all of its (hoped-for) promise of a normative human being.

Modeling Non-Futurity

Notably, *Member* goes beyond simply critiquing or eliding that paradigm. It also explores models for actively thinking about the adolescent body in non-narrative ways. Most prominently, when Frankie realizes that she could not “be a boy and go to the war as a Marine,” she decided to donate blood to the Red Cross; she wanted to donate a quart a week and her blood would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese, all over the whole world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people ... she could picture ahead, in the years after the war, meeting the soliders who had her blood, and they would say that they owed their life to her; and they would not call her Frankie –

they would call her Addams. (23)

This passage, appearing as it does in the context of World War II, reads at first as chauvinistic and even imperialist. Frankie want to populate other bodies, white and non-white, with her blood, and she seeks their gratitude for this act (“they would say they owed their life to her”). But this passage comes on the heels of yet another failure of Frankie’s vision: she “read the war news in the paper, but there were so many foreign places, and the war was happening so fast, and sometimes she did not understand ... Sometimes these pictures of the war, the world, whirled in her mind and she was dizzy” (23). Frankie’s interest in giving blood actually emerges out of her deep confusion about the world, its politics and norms. After all, her initial desire is to simply “*join* the war” (23, my emphasis), as if it were a club or movement rather than the clash of opposing factions seeking to conquer each other. Moreover, when we contextualize Frankie’s need for response from others about her bodily capabilities, it becomes clear that this is a need for interpersonal recognition, not individual dominance. After all, the novel’s very first page establishes that she is an “unjoined person” (3) who seeks union with others. But, as I have described, sanctioned opportunities for union are limited to those which “confirm” her body as heterosexual, racially pure, properly gendered, and reproductive. Blood donation is quite a different prospect. It will not garner Frankie sanction for having developed or produced something new with her body, but, rather, will grant her recognition for her extant bodily materials.

While this episode has historically-specific resonances, and bears with it Frankie’s unique investments, it also offers up blood donation at large as a model for conceiving of a given body’s capabilities in non-normative ways. First, while giving blood is a form of self-extension, a life-giving act, and an instance of directing bodily energies, it does not correspond to

heteroreproductive standards. It is not explicitly interpersonal, because one might donate to one person or to many. It is not exclusively sexual, much less heterosexual, because it requires no copulation, and no particular sexual orientation on the part of donor or recipient. And it is not future-oriented in the sense that the bodily fluid of semen is: unlike that substance, blood does not produce, or reproduce.³⁶ In fact, it goes in circles, circulating throughout the body indefinitely rather than heading for a telos or destination. In this way, blood donation fails to ratify the male-gendered standards of dominant narrative. In *Reading for the Plot* (1992), Peter Brooks defines narrative desire as “the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention” (103). While introducing new blood into someone’s system is not “forward-looking,” as I have already indicated, it also requires no “tumescence” – in fact, no erotic state at all, masculine or feminine. It is, relatively speaking, a non-narrative bodily event.

Blood donation also allows for a way out of the gendered and raced expectations imposed on adolescent bodies. Frankie’s fantasy takes place after she learns that she cannot become a boy, but the narrator’s description indicates not that she settles, instead, on becoming a *girl*, but that she toys with being non-gendered: “they would not call her Frankie – they would call her Addams.” While surnames are generally associated with patriarchal lineage, and men are more frequently referred to by their last names, the linguistic marker “Addams” technically imputes no definitive gender to its owner. And with fair reason: just as with sexual orientation, the gender of both blood donor and recipient is wholly irrelevant. Race and ethnicity are also irrelevant; Frankie’s blood can help “Australians” and “Chinese” alike. Of course, during the segregationist period of *Member*’s setting and publication, the interracial mixing of blood was both strongly militated against, and conceived of in explicitly erotic-and-bioreproductive terms – “mixed

blood” connoted miscegenation. But these facts further mark Frankie’s fantasy as a trenchant critique. While the terms of her blood donation may appear at first to be imperialist, the very fact that blood had strict racial boundaries at this time makes her free-flowing image rather radical. Moreover, while “white blood” might be considered to dilute “non-white blood” from a racist or colorist standpoint, and “white blood” (at least from an adolescent child in the 1940s) bears with it fewer fears of disease and contamination than “non-white blood,” Frankie’s fantasy is one of sameness and parity. It shows both Frankie and other people benefiting, and it shows all parties existing as equals: “it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people” (23). This interest in establishing kinship with racial and generational others speaks directly, and critically, to Frankie’s position as an adolescent. As we know that Frankie is expected to divest herself from the interracial world of her childhood as part of her transition to adulthood, her interest in mixing blood as a way of “doing something” with her body indicates a resistance to both of those imperatives.

Perhaps most pointedly, giving blood is a bodily change *not premised on developmentalism at all*. It does not require one to have any particular position along that trajectory, such that Frankie does not have to have reached adolescence, nor to have passed through adolescence into womanhood, in order to do it. Just as blood can be donated and received regardless of gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity, human bodies are capable of giving viable blood regardless of age.³⁷ Finally, then, blood donation in *Member* can be read as an alternative to the ways in which blood *normally* appears, and signifies, for an adolescent girl: as the menarchal blood expected of every developing female body, which in turn signals reproductive capacity and, thus, futurity; and as the hymenal blood that marks her induction into the heterosexual economy and, thus, the “ideal end” of straight union. Considering that *Member*

never treats menstruation or loss of virginity, donation appears not as a substitute for those externalizations of blood, but instead, as the hematological event that “*really*” matters, as if no others exist. It is no small fact, then, that one of the only moments in which our protagonist is said to see clearly comes after she conceives of this plan: “*she could picture ahead ... meeting the soldiers who had her blood*” (23, my emphasis). Contrary to dominant narrative standards, it is only when Frankie’s body does *not* portend adulthood, racial purity, and heteroreproductivity, but is instead seen to have potential for sociobiological exchange that ratifies none of the above, that any kind of future becomes visible.

Queer Endings

Classical narrative standards would have the Frances Addams of *The Member of the Wedding*’s last section be “finished,” or at least closer to the “ideal end” of heteronormative, reproductive, white adulthood. And indeed, seemingly hegemonic traits appear in this final figure. She uses the word “nigger” for the first time (144), effecting a linguistic and social distance from Berenice and the other black people who circulated within her pre-adult world; she is poised to be *physically* distanced from these people, in that she will soon live with only her father, aunt and uncle in the suburbs (158); she considers seeking out the soldier with whom she had a violent interaction, and even ruminates on marrying him (155); and she now associates mainly with her new best friend Mary Littlejohn – a blonde, “marshmallow-white” (160) girl her own age – instead of with Berenice and John Henry.

But each of these “developments,” upon closer scrutiny, appears to either defy change and closure or to parody them. For one thing, these are not organic or natural changes, but performances. Just as the novel itself self-consciously parcels Frankie’s story out into three parts, so do Frances’s actions constitute overly-demonstrative (if not self-aware) iterations of

developmental norms. Though she uses the epithet “nigger” in front of Berenice, she does so only at the moment of her crushing disappointment over the wedding. Moreover, this linguistic attempt at entering another social order does not actually achieve the division it gestures at. At the novel’s close, we find Frances valorizing Berenice’s opinion yet again, just as she did in the novel’s opening. “Luxembourg,” she muses to Berenice. ““Don’t you think that’s a lovely name?”” (162). Regarding the soldier, the narrator reports,

Suddenly it seemed she might as well ask the soldier to marry with her, and then the two of them could go away ... She remembered a part of the fortune [she had been told by Big Mama, Berenice’s mother] she had forgotten, that she would marry a light-haired person with blue eyes, and the fact that the soldier had light red hair and blue eyes was like a proof that this was the right thing to do. (155)

Frances’s interest in marrying the soldier is a response to prescriptive, *pre-scribed* versions of the future told to her by others, not an idea she herself “grows into.” At the same time, we see that the soldier is a wholly arbitrary option; Frances still does not understand that her body “should” portend a particular future, and thus the soldier is just one of several companions she considers. Just preceding this passage, we find her wondering if she should track down Honey Brown, who is on the lam. And just after, we hear of her new friend Mary. Frances now seeks to pair up rather than to triangulate, but the other body in question is not predetermined – “she must find somebody, anybody, that she could join with to go away” (155). And nor can these prospective pairings confirm her potential for proper social/biological reproduction. Honey Brown would make for an interracial, intergenerational coupling with Frances, while Mary Littlejohn makes for a non-reproductive, non-heterosexual coupling.

These “failures” appear alongside references to Frances’s continued failures of vision,

further strengthening the connection that the novel has drawn between sociobiological normativity and narrative normativity. Frances is rejected from Jarvis and Janice's union, but this rejection does not lead her to envision the "right" narrative for herself: to become part of a socially-sanctioned union *of her own*. On a more literal level, Frances has only vague impressions of what occurred at the wedding: "The next hours [after arriving for the wedding] were unexplainable. The wedding was like a dream ... When she first put foot inside [the house where the wedding took place], it was as though her eyeballs had been slightly stirred; there were mixed impressions of pink roses, the smell of floor wax, mints and nuts in silver trays" (145). While these failures of vision can be attributed to the trauma of her rejection, they remind us of how the classical imperative of proper closure, typified by the wedding, make for the only recognizable (and experienceable) form of narrativity. Moreover, the fact that our protagonist *still* experiences failures of vision shows just how performative the move into the third stage – that of "Frances," in this case – truly is. In fact, though she has rechristened herself "Frances" from "F. Jasmine," she goes on to experience the same kind of "accident of vision" that had terrified the latter. While walking down an alley in Part III, just as she had in Part II, a "cat ... leaped up on a garbage can, and in the darkness she could see its outline against the light ... She whispered: 'Charles!' and then, 'Charlina.' But it was not her Persian cat, and when she stumbled toward the can it sprang away" (153). While frightening to Frances, this experience nonetheless shows her to be oscillating in the same space as Frankie and F. Jasmine, out of the purview of the schemas that make "sense" of events and bodies alike.

The Member of the Wedding ends with a rather gruesome image, one that likewise depicts the failure of vision. Frankie's cousin John Henry, having contracted meningitis, is described as having "been screaming for three days and his eyeballs were walled up in a corner stuck and

blind” (162). (This description, like so many others in the novel, appears ex-post-facto; it is recalled, not directly treated within the text.) Gary Richards notes that John Henry’s “actions [throughout *Member*] are those of a stereotypical sissy” (179); we might therefore conclude that the future-teenager or future-adult John Henry has escaped certain persecution, making his death some kind of queer martyrdom.³⁸ But that very logic of futurism is precisely what the text rejects. Without such epistemology, wondering what such a figure has “ultimately” escaped makes no sense. And nor does wondering what such a figure’s behavior “truly” portends; the novel’s machinations also make improbable, if not impossible, the normativizing ends of diagnosing childhood queerness. As Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley write, “queerness is assumed to be incompatible with [a child’s] future, but it will be okay for it to be part of the past. It can be acknowledged in the presence among adults only with reassuring proviso[s]” (xviii), such as “s/he doesn’t know any better,” or “it’s just a phase.” The novel’s insistence on synchronicity makes impossible the deployment of the future anterior tense – of a childhood queerness that *will have been a phase*.

Rachel Adams claims that John Henry’s grotesque expiration makes him “the best that a freak can be ... for in McCullers’s fiction [or we might say, the broader world she dramatizes] bodily difference often must be hidden, normalized, or punished” (575). Specifically, though, his death returns us to two of the tropes that have circulated throughout the text: the failure of vision (“eyeballs ... walled up”) and sets of threes (“screaming for three days”). Of course, this scene is one of extraordinary pain, but it is also one of transcending dynamism. It occurs in the midst of markers of normative narrativity – sequential days that constitute yet another tripartite structure – and yet it features someone failing in his powers of vision. Thus, I argue that this death can be read as a critical resistance to narrative and somatic expectations, one that reinforces the work

McCullers has achieved throughout the text with Frankie. What has likewise been striking about Frankie's body is not its liminality, but its nonpredictability. It doesn't just *not* point to the kind of triumphalism that developmentalism imagines, it points nowhere and everywhere, making it anti-narrative, and anti-narrativizable. It is fitting, then, that *Member's* closing, the very point at which the standards of classical realism would call for the novel's elements to make sense as a discrete, ordered story, and for that story to provide closure through the restoration of equilibrium, leaves us with both John Henry's deadly defiance of predictivity and meaning, and with Frankie's lively, open-ended announcement, "I'm just mad about –."

While *Member* thus counters classical narrative form on the highest level of organization, we cannot deny that this *is* an ending, no matter how open-ended. Whereas I have claimed that *Member* is dedicated to demystifying how dominant narrative structure is imposed on human bodies in the twentieth-century West – producing certain social requirements as inevitable events and certain isolated changes as meaningful on a large scale – I have not attempted, nor could I succeed in, proving that the novel *itself* is non-narrative. But we might say that it acts as what Chatman calls "one kind of modernist narrative," the antistory. As he states, "if the classical narrative is a network (or 'enchainment') of kernels affording avenues of choice only one of which is possible, the *antistory* may be defined as an attack on this convention which treats all choices as equally valid" (56). By dethroning adolescence from its privileged place as a catalytic and deterministic element in the teleological story of human development, *and* by refusing its status as the *raison d'être* of the coming-of-age novel,³⁹ *Member* presents us with one such antistory.

We might revisit the novel's first sentence to clarify this possibility: "It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old" (3). While, as I have suggested, the

dominance of the human developmental schema immediately codes “it” as something central to Frankie’s adolescent age – say, menarche, or sexual awakening, or first love – that alternative epistemological field created through McCullers’s literary techniques allow us to summon, but not settle on, any number of referents, from the mundane to the profound. It offers, in other words, any number of “avenues of choice,” beyond those to which the developmental narrative wants to restrict us. In doing so, *Member* suggests that the elements of human experience might be plotted in any number of ways. And in turn, it makes some of our most trenchant cultural signs resignify. The existence of a previous season, and the coming of a next season, are things that we as readers infer when we hear that first sentence, just as we impute nascent maturity to a pubescent child. But as the novel goes on to loosen its grip on the periodization, order, and causality upon which twentieth-century temporal norms insist, it shows us that terms such as “summer” and “twelve” need not perform the operations they normally do. “Spring” need not endlessly produce and thereby institutionalize “summer;” “twelve” need not endlessly produce and thereby institutionalize the futures of “reproductivity,” “adulthood,” and “heterosexuality.” Just as McCullers’s work makes the noun “it” equivocal, something strange happens to “summer” and to “twelve.” Their connection to other terms begins to look arbitrary. And they begin to stand on their own.

Notes

¹ Miller, interestingly enough, is referring here to “normal” events, such as weddings, that provide closure for the traditional novel. Their nonnarratability is valuable in hegemonic terms, in that as it curtails the anarchic energies of a given story. In this chapter, I consider the “nonnarratable” to mean something somewhat rather different: an element *within the narrative* (not at its end) that refuses to produce a normative narrative arc.

² The referent here is not only immediately unclear, but never specified by the novel’s end. In this chapter, I discuss the import of such ambiguity.

³ The age of puberty has, of course, lowered over time, and also varies according to location. But 12 has nonetheless always been a prepubescent or pubescent age within experts schemas: in 1904’s *Adolescence*, Hall cites an average age of 14 for menarche amongst United States girls (477), while in 1969, Paul Osterrieth claimed that “at about the age of 10 for a girl, and about 12 for a boy, the somatic transformations of puberty begin to appear, and for most people they constitute the principal characteristic of entry into adolescence and the motivation of the other changes of this age” (13).

⁴ Human beings’ bodies are not actually renewable, or cyclical on a large scale, a point that proves this seasonal comparison further disingenuous.

⁵ It becomes even more clear that adolescence is a fiction, a *necessary social fiction*, when we realize that the restraints imposed on the average adolescent aim at keeping that individual from reproducing before he or she is “ready” – i.e. an adult, and married. In other words, whereas puberty is indeed a fact, adolescence is the fiction created around it that allows for the lag-time between sexual maturity (age 12, on average) and the acceptability of that maturity (age 18+?) to be managed.

⁶ Writing of narrative in particular, Chatman claims, “our minds inveterately seek structure, and they will provide it if necessary. So one may argue that pure ‘chronicle’ is difficult to achieve. ... [But t]he reader ‘understands’ or supplies [the causal element]. ... ‘Because’ is inferred through ordinary presumptions about the world” (45). Whether or not the impulse to seek structure and to narrativize is endemic to the human condition is, I believe, irrelevant; it should not keep us from interrogating the effects of this impulse.

⁷ In calling *Member* a late modernist novel, I seek to establish two points. First, the novel has clear affinities with the kinds of formal experimentation associated with literary modernism – including techniques such as distorted perspective and temporal disorientation. Second, it also possesses many of the attributes associated with literary *and* cultural *postmodernism*, including a degree of metafictionality and skepticism about strict ontological categories.

In attempting to describe what he sees as the neglected space of late modernism, Tyrus Miller looks to Brian McHale’s distinction between the two spaces: “Modernist fiction ... is predominantly ‘epistemological’ in nature: it seeks, despite the confusing webs of psychic, perceptual, and social facts, to *disclose* a coherent, knowable world. Postmodernist fiction, in contrast, functions differently. Relinquishing the modernist quest to know ‘the’ world, it *invents* possible worlds; postmodernist fiction is, in McHale’s terms, *ontological*, world-making, rather than world-disclosing” (12). Oddly enough, we might map the opposite terms on each field from a cultural-theoretical point of view. That is, postmodernism is the period in which certainties about essentialism or ontology – both feminist and anti-feminist, anti-racist and racist, and so forth – break down, and critical investigations of epistemology – the normal frameworks through which we have “known” what it is to be a woman, a non-white person, and so forth – begin to flourish. While *Member*, as I have stated, is clearly modernist, it evinces skepticism about the dominant epistemology around human bodies. And while it engages with narrative form *within* a narrative, we cannot quite say that it is ironic or self-reflexive; its engagement with developmentalism is critical, not playful. In short, as the novel does not fit neatly within either modernism or postmodernism, I sympathize with Miller’s insistence on late modernism as a useful category.

⁸ Similarly, Rachel Adams describes the “historical specificity of McCullers’s writing, in which freakish characters point to the untenability of normative concepts of gender and race at a moment when these categories were defined with particular rigidity” (552).

⁹ See Elizabeth Freeman's *The Wedding Complex* (49).

¹⁰ See "'Some Unheard-of Thing': Freaks, Families, and Coming of Age in *The Member of the Wedding*."

¹¹ Elise Ann Earthman has summarized the critical tendencies around the book as follows: "Is Frankie's story, as some 1960s writers argue, one of an awkward misfit's successful transformation into an acceptable young woman (e.g., Gosset 1965)? Do we find in *The Member of the Wedding* a case study of the cost to be a free-spirited young 'tomboy' of assuming the straitjacket of the traditional female role, as suggested by more recent critics (e.g., White 1986)? Or do we read deeply enough to discover that 'Frankie's attraction to her brother is incestuous, whereas her attraction to her brother's bride is homosexual/lesbian,' as Thadious Davis has very recently suggested (216, also Adams 1999)?" (191). See page 5 of this essay for a mention of the critical move from universalist to feminist readings of the novel.

¹² While my argument is sympathetic to the open-endedness suggested by Gleeson-White's favored term in *Strange Bodies*, "becoming," I believe it has a rather problematic resonance. As I show, McCullers's text critiques as highly problematic the notion that both narratives and bodies move inexorably forward.

¹³ See, for example, Frederic I. Carpenter's "The Adolescent in American Fiction" (1957) and Ihab Hassan's "The Character of Post-War Fiction in America" (1962).

¹⁴ See Nancy Lesko's *Act Your Age!*, which notes that "adolescence and the modern temporal order were creations of the same historical period ... The rise of uniform world clock time at the turn of the twentieth century [became] the dominant definer of human lives and measure of success and failure" (107).

¹⁵ While Mitterauer's quotation refers specifically to contemporary times, the World War II era in which *Member* appeared certainly qualifies as a time of "accelerated ... social change."

¹⁶ Of course, we cannot forget Freud's work on repression. As he explains in the *Essays*, repression guards against the development of the perversions, but it also produces neurotics and hysterics. In other words, even "normal" human sexuality is constantly calibrating for itself. But perhaps more importantly, the drive toward "normality" produces its own casualties.

¹⁷ Gleeson-White claims that "the female adolescent is even more 'grotesque' than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood and, in the case of ... Frankie, between femininity and masculinity" (*Strange Bodies* 12).

¹⁸ The *OED* defines "narrativize" as "to impose the structure of a narrative on; to present or interpret (events, experience, etc.) as or in the form of a narrative," whereas "narrate" means "to relate, recount; to give an account of, tell as a narrative." I will therefore use the term "narrativize" rather than "narrate" in several places; the latter, I argue, is an action that can only take place when the former work has been completed.

¹⁹ As Jeff Abernathy puts it, Frankie's move into adolescence constitutes "a time when she will feel compelled to shed all association with blackness" (85). Louise Westling's article "Tomboys and Revolting Femininity" also briefly traces the history of the Southern tomboy archetype, suggesting that Frankie is a descendant of this tradition.

²⁰ See, for example, the novel's frequent descriptions of Berenice throughout, the description of the soldier on page 72, and the description of Mary Littlejohn on page 160.

²¹ See Normal Kiell's *The Adolescent Through Fiction* (1959). Kiell notes that "fiction has made us perhaps overfamiliar with the agonies and absurdities of adolescence. Probing the souls of adolescents has become one of the vices of tired writers all over the world, as perhaps can be seen from the nearly five hundred novels of adolescence since 1900 listed in [his] bibliography" (12). His chapter, "On Physical Development," catalogs how multiple novels contemporaneous to McCullers's detail the major bodily changes experienced by their adolescent protagonists.

²² Writing of Frankie's fantasy of living with Jarvis and Janice in Alaska, Freeman suggests that "the cold, white snow she desires might be read in opposition to the warm, red blood that will shortly announce her womanhood. In this sense, wedding white liberates her body from the threat of puberty, mitigating the trauma of a tomboy getting breasts or menstruating by evoking the pleasure and relief of freezing" (54). While I am taken with Freeman's reading, two issues abound. First, we soon find out that "wedding white" can't liberate her body in the ways she imagines; she has misunderstood the fact that social norms actually compel *her* to wear wedding white and be a bride, and will not stand for her to simply act as a third party in a heterosexual marriage. Secondly, Freeman's diction suggests precisely what I argue McCullers is militating *against* – the logic of inevitability that says menstruation "will," i.e. "must," announce "womanhood," and which also pretends that "womanhood" is a neutral term (rather than one implicated in both compulsory heterosexuality and dominant narrative form).

²³ Many critics have focused on the queerness of the novel's open ending – specifically, our protagonist's final statement, "I'm just mad about –" (163). While this open-endedness could, to some, point to lesbian identity (particularly insofar as this section introduces her romantic friendship with Mary Littlejohn), it also represents a genuinely queer occasion for unsolidified, fluid, and multivalent affiliations *instead* of identity. Similarly to Adams, Kenschaft also notes that McCullers "never portrayed homosexuality as a social or political entity: in her texts, homoerotic interests do not make for a basis for human connection and collective activity as they do in many actual lesbian and gay communities" (227).

²⁴ Frankie notes that both Jarvis's and Janice's names begin with "Ja," and decides that she wants a name that also begins with those letters; she mentions "F. Jasmine" on page 18 and employs it on 32.

²⁵ I am skeptical of Freeman's statement that "Frankie herself, in a change she neither instigates nor remarks on, becomes 'Frances'" (47). While, as I have argued, the text casually institutes these changes, it is hard to say that her signing a letter to her father as "Frances" shows a lack of instigation on her part.

²⁶ Most critics simply refer to the protagonist as "Frankie" throughout their work. I use her three different names as they correspond to the novel's different sections, in order to make clear just how rigid this segmentation is.

²⁷ In fact, it may be the mature-sounding endpoint of "Frances," along with those narrative imperatives, that have lead some critics to read the novel's end as an acquiescence to such social pressures Louise Westling, for example, claims that "the final form of *The Member of the Wedding* ... inexorably moves Frankie toward an acceptance of conventional femininity;" she imagines that "at the end of the book we find [Frankie] completely changed into a giddy teenager, having accepted her femininity and her real name, Frances" (159-60). As I note in this chapter, it is not clear that "Frances" is necessarily Frankie's real name.

²⁸ See Westling.

²⁹ Gleeson-White interprets Frankie's name changes in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of the feminine masquerade. She argues, "Frankie's parade of feminine masks, signaled by her name changes as well as her dress, parodies any notion of a fixed identity. There is no such thing here as a peeling away of masks in the hope of getting to some firm core" (*Strange Bodies* 91).

³⁰ We might consider specific passages such as the one wherein Frankie purchases a new dress that ultimately appears ridiculous on her. Adams claims that "the new dress is an important component in her imagined transformation from gangly teenager to attractive woman, and Frankie repeatedly insists on the beauty of the garment rather than her appearance in it, as if the dress alone had the power to alter or erase the identity of the wearer" (560).

³¹ See *Writing Beyond the Ending*.

³² I argue that McCullers makes it difficult to ascertain whether or not this encounter should be termed an attempted rape. Many critics have read it as such, though we might also note that the encounter becomes violent only after the soldier attempts to touch Frankie. I would suggest that the encounter's status as an attempted rape or an attempted seduction is therefore irrelevant; as Judith Giblin James argues, "Frankie's failure to understand – much less

anticipate – the soldier’s attack is an important sign of her sexual ambivalence and unwillingness to accept the limited female role her culture and her developing adolescent body seem to require” (54). In fact, we see that this episode resonates with Frankie’s memories of (non-coercive) sexual encounters, including witnessing two of her father’s married tenants making love.

³³ “Narrative is not ‘simply there,’” as Roof states; “its shapes, assumptions, and operations manifest a complex, naturalized process of organization, relation, and connection” (xv).

³⁴ Adams’s and Fahy’s work indicate that the increased focus on the nuclear family in the post-World War II era was a direct reaction to the perceived threats of homosexuality and feminism.

³⁵ It is relevant here to note that virtually all accounts of classical narrative, so matter how critical in character, take it for granted that the average individual knows what counts as an event *to begin with*, questions of those events’ importance aside. As Chatman states, “clearly a narrative is a whole because it is constituted of elements – events and existents – that differ from what they constitute. Events and existents are single and discrete, but the narrative is a sequential composite. Further, events in the narrative (as opposed to the chance compilation) tend to be related or mutually entailing” (21). But the blank spaces of McCullers’s text insist that to even say something is “an event” means that particular value judgments have already been made – judgments that allow for the construction of a normative, diachronic field of knowledge.

³⁶ See Murat Ayedemir’s work on semen in *Images of Bliss* (2007), which plots out alternatives to the cultural notion that the substance, though liquid, is ultimately thought of as “solid” – insofar as it is supposed to lead to (re)production.

³⁷ According to the Red Cross, persons under 16 or 17 (depending on state law) cannot donate blood purely because of legal restrictions. There is no upper age limit for blood donation. See http://www.redcross.org/services/biomed/0,1082,0_557_00.html.

³⁸ We should note that John Henry has been presented with various “cautionary models” of sexual outsiders (McKinnie and Dews 65), such as that of the transgendered girl Lily Mae. Berenice refers to Lily Mae as a young man who “fell in love with a man ... and turned into a girl.” While Berenice is relatively nonchalant about this person’s existence, saying “I have heard of many a peculiar thing,” she also tells John Henry and Frankie, “you don’t need to know Lily Mae Jenkins. You can live without knowing him” (57).

³⁹ A survey like Kiell’s suggests that the coming-of-age novel is only possible as a narrative because of the somatic changes and sexual initiations of the characters. But while *Member* at first seems *occasioned* by Frankie’s adolescence, the book goes on to make her status incidental and non-deterministic. Adolescence, here, is the narrative crisis that McCullers refuses to treat as a crisis.

Chapter 3:

**“Castration ain’t de main t’ing”:¹
Transgenderism, Capitalist Critique, and the Deployment of Puberty**

Processes and activities that seem impossible for a body to undertake at some times and in some cultures are readily possible in others. What are regarded as purely fixed and unchangeable elements of facticity, biologically given factors, are amenable to wide historical vicissitudes and transformation. – Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (190)

Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women. At best the transsexual can live out his fantasy of femininity – a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with the rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention. – *Volatile Bodies* (207)

The past two decades have seen major shifts in how public culture conceives of gender transitioning. In his foreword to the *Transgender Studies Reader*, Stephen Whittle explains that the anthology includes “work from before the 1990s that is representative of the vast majority of work of those times, when the primary concern was the psychology and medicalization of transsexualism. In the 1990s, a new scholarship, informed by community activism, started from the premise that to be trans was not to have a mental or medical disorder” (xii). Ariadne Kane elaborates on the first point in the *International Encyclopedia of Sexology*, explaining:

The term ‘transsexualism’ was coined by D.O. Cauldwell, an American sexologist, and popularized by Harry Benjamin in the 1950s and 1960s. Research on this phenomenon was [further] facilitated in 1980 when the concepts of transsexualism and gender disorders were recognized in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III*. In 1988, transsexualism was defined by the *DSM-III-R* as having the following diagnostic criteria: 1. persistent discomfort and sense of inappropriateness about one’s assigned sex; 2. persistent preoccupation for at least two years with getting rid of one’s primary and secondary sex characteristics and acquiring the sex characteristics of the *other sex*; and 3. *having reached puberty*. *DSM-IV* has [since]

replaced the term ‘transsexual’ with the generic term ‘gender disorder.’ (my emphasis)²

The wave of activism that Whittle refers to in part allowed for the community-initiated term “transgender” to be installed in the contemporary Western lexicon starting in 1992. An umbrella term that widens the scope of “transsexual,” “transgender” includes everyone from fully-operative persons who undergo surgery and take hormones to individuals who shun any kind of intervention and identify as “gender-queer” or ambiguous.³ Not incidental to this changing picture is the increased visibility of female-to-male (FTM) trans people, many of whom have had or maintain deep roots in lesbian communities, and often eschew genital reconstruction.⁴ These individuals have prompted interrogations of the male-centric and heteronormative foundations of medicalized transsexualism. As Sandy Stone and others have explained, the goals of medical practitioners working with trans individuals have, historically, been to make a “proper” male or female out of a patient, one who conforms to the normative sexual and aesthetic standards of their chosen gender.⁵ In sum, then, the late twentieth century constitutes a rather contentious period: it is one in which the dominant history of transsexualism still looms over trans individuals’ efforts at self-determination – after all, there is no significant distance between the 1988 date of transsexualism’s *DSM* definition cited by Kane and Whittle’s “post-medical” 1990s date – while the work of trans and trans-friendly activists and writers, some of which I consider in this chapter, continues to open up new conceptual possibilities.

The complicated relationship between feminist theory and transgenderism can provide us with an index of these overlapping cultural moments, the one of medicalized transsexualism, and the other of “post-transsexualism,” or transgenderism. This relationship indicates what is at stake in the shift from one to the other, and what is at stake in the work that has emerged out of that shift. To begin with, despite Whittle’s suggestion that this shift has been clean and total, much

feminist work well into the 1990s and 2000s has continued to imagine the trans body only, and quite negatively, as transsexual – as a medicalized, technological figure, usually cast as male, that has been forged into the “opposite” sex. Such connoting leaves these feminist texts at a rather curious impasse. For example, Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994), cited above, provides a valuable look at the ways in which difference is inscribed on particular bodies, and an equally valuable re-visioning of the body as a historically-specific object. But she bluntly refuses to validate the historical specificity of the *transsexual* body, on the grounds that it constitutes a cynical exploitation of the misogynist possibilities offered by the Western medical establishment. In fact, in the second quotation from Grosz cited above, the female body – initially, on her account, a differentially-inscribed object rather than an essentializable fact – has suddenly become the valorized, essentialized “real” *vis-à-vis* the transsexual’s “crude,” fantastical body. In this way, Grosz participates in the long history of feminist antagonism to transsexualism, epitomized by Janice Raymond’s infamous *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), which claims that “all transsexuals rape women women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (104). In 2005, radical feminist Sheila Jeffries echoed these claims, but in relation to female-to-male gender transitions – arguing that they constitute “an extension of the beauty industry [that] offer[s] cosmetic solutions to deeper rooted problems [i.e., misogyny]” (Bindel). In such views, gender transitioning is not merely a capitulation to a mass-consumerist, technomedical complex that trades on anti-female social and aesthetic standards; it is an agent of that system.

Such views, however, are certainly not universal. Many feminist theoretical texts, including Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1987-2004) – a direct

response to Raymond – and Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), have offered much more nuanced accounts of gender transitioning, indicating how theories of transgenderism are both indebted to feminist theory and primed to contribute to it. Stone and Halberstam, moreover, align themselves directly with both feminist and trans communities. But such texts still discuss transgenderism in particularly (post)modern, high-tech, visually-oriented terms. Stone, for example, draws heavily on Donna Haraway’s work to champion a vision of the trans body as politicized cyborg, while Halberstam claims that the “body in transition indelibly marks late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century visual fantasy” – a fantasy that, while imagined through the science fiction of *Terminator 2*, *The Matrix*, and the like, is “powerfully realized ... in transgender film” (76). At the same time, she suggests that theories of postmodernity have critically, and somewhat unthinkingly, set up the transgendered body as a late capitalist phenomenon. While, for theorists like Fredric Jameson, hyperspace – a “technotopic vision of space and flesh in a process of mutual mutation” – “was always corporate space,” Halberstam claims that “for some postmodern artists, the creation of new bodies in an aesthetic realm offers a way to begin adapting to life after the death of the subject” (103).⁶ In other words, while gender transitioning has long appeared through the framework of for-profit technomedical manipulations, and while the contemporary trans body might emerge out of (late) capitalism, these phenomena do not necessarily leave those conditions unproblematized.⁷

This chapter redirects the conversation around transgenderism, technology, and medicalization by exploring how, over the past two decades, several texts have figured gender transitions as organic phenomena, akin to or constitutive of puberty. Those I focus on here include Leslie Feinberg’s semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), Jamison

Green's memoir *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004), Michelle Cliff's novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), and Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1998). I show how each shifts our attention away from the models of transsexualism-as-technological-misogyny or -as-medical-triumph, while remaining cognizant of the material processes such as hormone therapy and genital reconstruction that such transitions can entail.⁸ These works thereby circumvent the results-oriented logic of (post)modern medicine – that which produces the fetishized “artifacts” that so worry Grosz, Raymond, and Jeffries – without submitting to the tenor of the latter figures' complaints. As a group, these works represent a revisionist movement, and, I argue, a queer-feminist one at that: they situate the trans person as a self-determined figure, neither dependent upon the technomedical complex nor content with the standards of misogyny and heteronormativity with which it is entangled.

But these texts constitute more than a response to the transsexual imaginary so vehemently limned by Grosz et al. In using the concept of puberty to circumvent (even if only ideologically) medicalized transsexualism, I argue that these texts also wrestle with the pervasive discourses that affect *all* bodies within their purview. To begin with, by establishing puberty as a moment of learned genderedness and of potential revision, they trouble the idealized status puberty has held since at least the turn of the century: as a one-way switch that engages the body's always-extant promise of a particular gender and appropriate reproductive abilities. And while marshalling the concept of puberty to explain their transitions may at first appear as an appeal to normative logic, I argue that this marshalling is highly *illogical*, and decisively so. Whereas contemporary culture conceives of puberty as spontaneous, gender transitioning is conceived of, often in direct contrast, as a calculated manipulation;⁹ these texts' framing of the latter in terms of the former, then, creates a critical disjuncture that forces the reader to scrutinize

such entrenched beliefs. Many of these texts also see transitioning as a “second puberty” – a concept that utterly confounds common knowledge of the process. Puberty is an all-important, determining, and literally *once-in-a-lifetime* phenomenon: “*the* period of during which a young person reaches sexual maturity,” and “*the* sequence of structural and functional changes that occur in the body during this period,” per the *OED* (my emphasis).

By engaging with puberty in these ways, these texts indicate that the discourse of developmentalism outlined in Chapter 2 still persists in their postmodern milieu. At the same time, they criticize the ways in which the advancements that have made certain trans experiences possible can perpetuate the agendas in which developmentalism is historically embedded – including, but not limited to, capitalism and imperialism.¹⁰ That is, the apparent “developments” and “progress” that have brought us to the contemporary transgender moment are not taken for granted in these texts, but treated as potentially problematic. As I will outline, these treatments have unique resonance for each work’s respective context: the Northeast working-class butch/femme communities depicted in *Stone Butch Blues*; the metropolitan mainstream of *Becoming a Visible Man*; and the postcolonial Caribbean surveyed in *No Telephone to Heaven* (set in Jamaica) and *Cereus Blooms at Night* (set in Lantanacamara, a fictional island based on Trinidad). For example, *Heaven* and *Cereus* most explicitly indicate that the medicalization of gender transitioning participates in a particular post-Enlightenment progress narrative, one that valorizes technological developments as weapons against various forms of “backwardness,” and which holds the “mature” West up as the epitome of scientific and cultural sophistication.¹¹ As literary rather than visual texts, these works are uniquely positioned to make these claims: they have the ability to at once directly negotiate with dominant discursive formations, and remove us from the visual epistemology that governs the modern medical and scientific spheres – finding or

providing material evidence for those discursive formations. I argue that the literary depiction of organic transitioning, then, is not an attempt to “naturalize” transgenderism as no different from the categories of male and female but, rather, an attempt to conceptually counter the enduring twentieth-century narratives of human development and medical intervention – those which stress the triumphant end points of a normative body, a coherent identity, and the “saved” individual, and those which, in turn, intertwine with hegemonic regimes. To put it one way, these texts refuse to “do” transgenderism and puberty without also “doing” radical critiques such as anti-capitalism or anti-imperialism – thereby indicating these deep conceptual and material intertwinings.

A Note on Historical Periodicity

As I have intimated, these texts are poised to contribute to debates around modern and postmodern periodicity. Although these debates will not be a major concern of this chapter, it is worth remarking on the relationship among transgenderism and these two periods. Susan Stryker argues that

the ... assertion that the material world is reflected in the mirror of representation is “modern,” in a long historical sense, to the extent that it gained force along with the rise of scientific materialism in societies of Western European origin since the end of the fifteenth century. “Matter” is what ultimately matters in this modern European worldview; it lies at the root of knowledge, and is the fundamental source of the meaning (re)invested in it through the derivative and secondary practices of human cognition and perception. In this seemingly commonsensical view, the materiality of anatomical sex is represented socially by a gender role, and subjectively as a gender identity ... the

relationship between bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity are imaged to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic – a real thing and its reflections. (9)

Transgenderism-as-organic-process puts into question the notion that the commodified, acted-upon body is primary. And transgenderism itself models a misalignment of appearance and “fact” through the human body, disrupting the mimetic logic to which Stryker refers. But she suggests that moving beyond this materialist, modern scientization bring us into a postmodernism that makes room for the liberated trans person: as she claims, “transgender studies ... is the relatively new critical project that has taken shape in the past decade or so ... [one that] is intimately related to emergent ‘postmodern conditions’ for the production of knowledge,” and that this field’s appearance “captures the rupture between modern and postmodern epistemic contexts” (12). This explanation suggests a causality that we might be skeptical of, one in which “good” postmodernism steps in as a reaction to and a replacement for “bad” modernity. Moreover, Stryker’s analysis does not consider that transgenderism’s emergence in postmodernity might actually occasion criticism of those conditions from trans and non-trans sources alike. Without denying the potentialities afforded by postmodernity, the textual imaginings that I treat here, in fact, take a rather skeptical view of the prominent features of such a milieu, including globalization, the long afterlife of colonialism, and the increased obfuscation of labor relations in late capitalism. And in continuing to grapple with materialist, modern medical discourses, these texts show those discourses to be far from vanquished by “postmodern conditions.”

Puberty as Problem and Problematization: Leslie Feinberg and Jamison Green

In Chapter 2, I described adolescence and puberty as being conceived of in the twentieth century in particular narrative terms. This chapter shifts from an emphasis on the narrative

dynamics of puberty, and from an emphasis on formal techniques, to look at how my given texts conceptually counter the major assumptions behind the twentieth century narrative that is puberty – assumptions that, as I have stated, are ideologically entangled with particular capitalist and imperialist impulses. While puberty as a term – drawn from the Latin etymon “pubertat,” or “age of maturity” – has been used to refer to bodily changes since the sixteenth century,¹² beliefs about its significance began to be consolidated by the sexological work of the early 1900s. For example, in “The Transformations of Puberty,” the third essay in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Sigmund Freud presents an outline of puberty’s operations and purposes. He alludes, first, to the (ideally) teleological, predetermined nature of human development when he claims that “the starting-point and the final aim of the process [of puberty] which I have described are clearly visible” (74); the final aim is preparedness for interaction with a suitable sexual object. The essay frequently alludes to the heteroreproductive expectations that inform the idea of this aim. For example, Freud states that “the most striking of the processes at puberty has been picked upon as constituting its essence: the manifest growth of the external genitalia ... which have the obvious sense of being preparations for the sexual act – the erection of the male organ and the lubrication of the vagina” (74). While, presently, many liberal societies are quite willing to accept the existence of non-heterosexual lives, the heteroreproductive dimensions of puberty and its ahistorical character still persist. Consider, for example, that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines puberty as, “in human physiology, the stage or period of life when a child transforms into an adult normally capable of procreation.”

Of course, for Freud, puberty’s purpose is not limited to paving the way for heterosexual reproduction; it also initiates the differentiation between the sexes that may have been lacking theretofore. In the subsection “The Differentiation Between Men and Women,” he claims, “as we

all know, it is not until puberty that the sharp distinction is established between the masculine and feminine characters. From that time on, this contrast has a more decisive influence than any other upon the shaping of human life” (85). He goes on to explain that little girls and little boys are equally auto-erotic (rather than oriented toward an object-choice) prior to puberty, and that the libidos of both are therefore, in his view, “masculine.” Thus, when a girl becomes a woman, she must change her “leading erotogenic zone” from the clitoris (analogue to the penis) to the vagina; “the fact that women [make this change] ... together with the wave of repression at puberty, which ... puts aside their childish masculinity, are the chief determinants of the greater proneness of women to neurosis. ... These determinants ... are intimately related to the essence of femininity” (87). These latter statements clarify why, say, tomboyism in girls is relatively unproblematic before puberty (particularly vis-à-vis “sissyism” in boys),¹³ as well as why the failure or reluctance to let go of tomboyism is such a crisis: it constitutes a failure to give a proper “shap[e] ... [to] human life.” Puberty in the cultural imagination thus constitutes the switch that mediates between girlhood and womanhood, boyhood and manhood, *and* the place for potential earth-shattering failure – a place wherein countless things might, but hopefully do not, go wrong. In fact, it is no small point that Freud states that disturbances in those pubertal processes that separate one from one’s parents, and that lead one to select a sexual object, “have the gravest effects upon ... adult sexual life” (94) and on “the progress of civilization” (93).

Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* tracks a working class Jewish butch’s difficult coming to consciousness as an openly transgendered person. But it directly engages with dominant understandings of puberty such as those tendered by Freud by describing a much earlier difficulty for its narrator, Jess Goldberg: the childhood realization that hir¹⁴ move into adulthood would not constitute a “smooth line” but, rather, an experience of extreme dissonance.

Jess states that, once ze reached the age of 10, this former tomboy “didn’t have a sliver of cuteness to hide behind” (19); ze would now bear the brunt of social prejudice as a masculine adolescent, and, presumably, a masculine woman. Jess’s experience of dissonance means that she will not have a proper, linear shape to her human life. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam explicates this scenario: “tomboyism is quite common for girls and does not generally give rise to parental fears ... but [it] is punished ... when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification ... and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood” (5-6).

Understanding that the acceptable and temporary queerness afforded by the label “tomboy” is no longer viable, Jess suddenly sees the “scared and sad” woman ze is going to become in the mirror. Ze then “wonder[s] if [she is] brave enough to grow up and be her” (21). Hir dread and sadness bespeak Jess’s limited options as a working class child of unsympathetic parents, living in pre-Stonewall Buffalo. But this passage also bespeaks the possibility of agency. The adult Jess’s recounting of hir despair invokes two important concepts: first, hir adult transgendered status retroactively speaks to the non-inevitability of womanhood for a person deemed female at birth; second, hir recounting suggests that the transgendered individual may actually assume such non-inevitability quite early on, further discrediting the self-evident character of puberty. In wondering “*if*” ze can grow up into a woman,¹⁵ Jess renders growing up at once devastating and contingent – even elective. *Blues* thus seems to theorize what we might call an epistemology of the transgendered child. As ze states after hir transition, “this was almost *the body I expected before puberty* confounded me” (171, my emphasis). This description frames the transgendered child’s self-determination as crucial – a particularly striking move in that children are the objects, not subjects, of developmental discourse. *Blues* makes childish expectations, not official predictions, the main story.

In Jess's post-transition statement, *puberty*, and not *transgenderism*, is cited as the problem. The text thus shifts our attention from the idea of transgenderism as a problem to be solved, specifically through medical technology, to the idea that the concept of puberty *creates* problems for transgendered children. After all, if puberty was not framed as predetermined by one's body, inevitably and insistently marrying "girlhood" to "womanhood" and "boyhood" to "manhood," it would not constitute the crushing crisis that so many trans narratives report it to be.¹⁶ This latter tendency endorses the developmental narrative's vision of puberty as a moment of disequilibrium wedged between experiences of stasis; one might say that the trans experience simply intensifies this disequilibrium. In turn, transgenderism within such a framework begins to appear like a mere capitulation to normativity, an attempt to instate that postpubertal stasis. But *Blues* gives us, instead, a glimpse of other possibilities, a conceptual space for contingency within the usual story of puberty, and a championing of *prepubertal* self-determination that pushes backwards against the relentless forward movement of the developmental narrative.

Feinberg's account of dissonance also highlights a non-continuity that may be applicable to all bodies. As his experience of puberty calls into question the correspondence that the very term "puberty" assumes between "girl" and "woman," two points become clear. First, normative developmentalism is not necessarily totalizing, though it does seek to interpellate all bodies. To wit: the devastating experience of puberty for trans people might be read not as the triumph of normative developmentalism, but, instead, as a disclosure of its vulnerability. After all, "puberty" *fails*, and spectacularly so, to do its work at the very moment that the trans body experiences it as truly discordant, rather than predictable and meaningful (even if uncomfortable or strange). Second, Feinberg's account suggests by extension that "puberty" is an explanation deployed to make the correspondence between "girl" and "woman" (and "boy" and "man") *look*

perpetually imminent. This explanation insists that, even if the transition between the two states is traumatic, the experience is both inevitable and necessary. Recognizing that deployments of puberty seek to do that work of convincing, *and* that they might *fail* in doing it, creates a space for any given gendered individual to examine the effects of that work.

Despite the antagonism of many feminist theorists to transgenderism, and despite the hostility of lesbian-feminist communities to trans people that *Blues* depicts, this notion of non-continuity bears strong affinities with feminist work on (non-transgendered) puberty. Feminist theorists, writers, and activists from many cultures have long highlighted the trauma of this period for females, articulating the profound psychic and social disruptions found at the interstices of “girl” and “woman.” In *The Second Sex* (1953), for example, Simone DeBeauvoir describes the development of narcissism, or what she defines as a form of female masochism, inaugurated by a girl’s growth into the post-adolescent order. As she claims, “while “the boy is ... rid of narcissism by having his attention directed to his penis ... the little girl is confirmed in the tendency to make herself object” (279), to groom herself for and present herself to others. For women, and not just women who want to be masculine or male, puberty is a time of growing alienation from one’s idea of oneself – even as it is imagined as, by definition, growing *into* oneself. While the experience of a transgendered puberty is certainly not comparable to a non-transgendered one, the fact remains that the former has been articulated as an experience of estrangement from past images of oneself, and from the present self, in ways notably similar to feminist renditions of the latter.

Several contemporary writers and theorists have taken this idea of estrangement more explicitly into the sexual realm. Helena Maria Viramontes’s *The Moths* (1985), for example – a collection of stories featuring Chicana protagonists – likewise posits puberty as a time of

alienation from oneself, but also stresses the induction into an uneven sexual economy that accompanies, and often instantiates, this alienation. The collection's second story, aptly titled "Growing," describes how its main character Naomi is both rejected from the prepubescent social order in which boys and girls are relative equals, and inducted into the postpubescent sexual order in which she is molested by a male acquaintance. In this story, it is not the dissonance between childhood and adulthood *per se* that constitutes the trauma; it is the violence and lack of self-determination that mark it, and the reluctance to openly address the incommensurability of "girl" and "woman." Transgender texts such as *Blues*, in making this incommensurability and non-linearity the crux of their tales, indicate that our notion of puberty serves to paper over that incommensurability – making pubertal trauma for women and trans people all the more distressing and disorienting. These texts thereby give the lie to the idea that *non-transgendered* lives are somehow lived, in contrast to trans lives, as a coherent narrative. Of course, accounts such as Freud's do acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the experience of female puberty, but frame them as nonetheless necessary to normal functioning. In dissolving this framing, transgender narratives offer new perspectives to feminist analyses of developmental ideology.

While Feinberg's work treats puberty as a productive problem – one that reflects both the cultural insistence on an adulthood that "follows" from one's childhood, *and* the gap between the two – writers such as Jamison Green have harnessed the concept of puberty to explain transitioning itself. In his memoir, *Becoming a Visible Man*, Green states that "it finally dawned on me that I had not been able to grow up fully because I was never going to be an adult woman. I knew that the only way I could grow up – really be an adult – was to become a man. I needed to go through a puberty to which I could relate" (22). This "second puberty," as I will term it, is

aimed at the normative, respectable end of “grow[ing] up;” Green seeks to fit into mainstream society as a white, middle-class, adult man. And it appears, at least on the surface, to simply tell the same story about his trans body as is told about the normative body: one goes through puberty as one gender and then becomes an adult of that same gender. But his very use of this concept is rather estranging: dominant discourse holds that the constitution of a healthy, reproductive adult person does not involve degeneration or regression; such concepts are anathema to both the notion of human development *and* classical narratives such as the traditional coming-of-age story.¹⁷ Thus, the insistence on a second puberty, in harnessing a quite familiar human concept, actually constitutes an objection to how this concept has constructed “the human.”

More specifically, Green’s description speaks against the prevailing idea that puberty sets in motion a chain of inexorable events. As he states, “I had *not* been able to grow up fully because I was *never* going to be an adult woman.” And his description also speaks to the rather queer experience of being dually aged – as existing in both “non-trans years” and in “trans years,” we might say. As Green notes, a “problematic difference [existed] between my chronological age (mid-forties) and my biochemical age as I recreated myself (late teens)” (32). “Problematic” as this difference might be, prompting Green’s trans self to “need” to catch up to his body’s technical age, it presents a fascinating portrait of development along more than one temporal axis. While postmodern theory has made much of split subjectivity and the fragmented self – phenomena that deconstruct Enlightenment claims to the idealized, unified humanist subject – *Becoming a Visible Man* provides a rare first-hand account of psychic and somatic life on multiple temporal axes. Green exceeds and in fact doubles the temporal trajectory for human life, casting the prevailing notion of singular, linear, and teleological human growth as

insufficient for his needs.¹⁸

One of the more compelling features of Green's description of a second puberty is how it indicates that, even as a person who knew early on that he should eventually have a male body – he defines himself as someone who had a “transgender childhood,” “one in which the child unconsciously expresses [notable cross-]gender characteristics or behaviors” (13) – he still required some kind of formalized induction into the world of maleness. Just as his physical maleness had to be constructed, so too did his social and psychic maleness need to be learned – especially in that he had no past narrative of boyhood to refer to, unlike the majority of bodies labeled “male.” Green goes on to undertake a program of sexual and social exploration, culminating at one point in his joining a men's movement group. Transgenderism, in his account, involves a revisionary exploitation of the developmental narrative, so as to account for gender transitioning (“I was a transgendered child; I was always already male”) and so as to include his double development (“I was a girl, but I have now also been a boy”). This simultaneously forward- and backward-looking process defies the material facts: by all realist historical accounts, Green has never been, and can never be, a boy. And yet he insists on being a man, and that, as a man, he will have to have been a boy.

In their collection, *Curiouser and Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley claim that “the language of child sexuality is ... strictly governed by the language of [normative] temporality;” as I noted in Chapter 2, a child's “queerness is assumed to be incompatible with her future, but it will be okay for it to be part of the past” (xviii). But Green plays with temporal grammars in order to insist that his childhood queerness, *and* his second puberty, actually produced his “future” of a relatively normal adult male body. It is not that that adult exists *in spite of*, or *after the abandonment of*, prior queerness,

but because of it. The queer experience of a second puberty is also the cause of, not the barrier to, Green's eventually-stable male identity. Like Feinberg's, Green's unique conceptions downplay the importance of the technomedical complex in transitioning, even as his memoir details the physical aspects of that transition. And, like Feinberg, but perhaps more hopefully, Green privileges instead a self-generated mythology that rejects the centrality of ("normal") puberty to one's adult life. As he asks, perhaps knowing that the socially sanctioned answer is "the latter": "What's more valid: your feelings and your certain knowledge of yourself or your body, the thing that other people see which signals to them what they can expect from you?" (7) Green's concept of a second puberty prompts us to extend the logic of his own question a bit further: it is not the body itself that signals expectations, but rather those discourses *such as* puberty that appear *around* bodies, *telling* us what to "expect."

Green's concept of a second puberty, in its refusal to expunge the first (a second puberty, of course, presumes a first), provides a powerful example of how many contemporary transgender works champion intertextual revisionism over erasure. The insistence on erasing one's past has been as pervasive as that triumphal narrative that finds the trans person trumpeting the vanquishing of their "problem" (their "old" gender) with the help of medical technology, thereby reinstating stasis after a period of disequilibrium. But what both scenarios have in common is the disavowal of the "old" gender, a disavowal that seeks to smooth out rather than complicate normative accounts of human life. Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back" argues that trans people have long been unable to generate a counterdiscourse to totalizing accounts, such as pathologizing medical discourses or feminist accusations of misogyny, because they have been "programmed to disappear." As ze explains,

The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase h/erself, to fade into the "normal"

population as soon as possible. Part of this process is known as constructing a plausible history – learning to lie effectively about one’s past. What is gained is acceptability ... What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience ... Instead, authentic experience is replaced by a particular kind of story, one that supports the old constructed positions. (11)

But if/when we recognize or recover “the transsexual’s erased history,” Stone maintains, “we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender” (12). Green’s openness about his second puberty allows for such a possibility. He does not erase but rather rewrites his history – indicating that trans people do not necessarily seek total assimilation into a streamlined, “boys-to-men” (or “girls-to-women”) story, even as he himself seeks to experience being a boy and then a man. And in pointing to the multiple temporal registers in which his life and development have taken place, he produces a palimpsestic effect that, as much as possible, “represent[s] the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience.” And perhaps more importantly, Green does not reject the medicalization of transsexuality as a whole. He insists that medical machinations stand alongside organic concepts like puberty, and alongside independently-driven, grassroots bids at experiencing manhood – such as his membership in the men’s movement. The program of disappearance is renegotiated here on the trans person’s own terms.

As I have described above, both Feinberg’s semiautobiography and Green’s memoir posit a transgender epistemology – the knowledge that one’s childhood body does not predict one’s adult body in the ways that popular/medical accounts have indicated it does, and the knowledge that one is meant to exceed one’s assigned sex and gender. Neither figure is said to be searching for a truly authentic experience of adult maleness, or expecting that they will automatically comprehend how to live as males; rather, each is simply seeking the particular experience of

adult genderedness that he or ze expected *before* adult femaleness encroached upon those expectations. These texts (re)articulate transgenderism as the instantiation of prior personal expectations that were overwritten by normative social dictates, thus troubling the developmental ethos of forward motion and progress. Herein, we might read a complex fluctuation between essentialism and constructionism: each person's *female designation*, not hir transgenderism, supplants "natural" expectations for growth, at the same time that each person feels a subjective need to socially and surgically construct hirself as a male person. These accounts resonate with feminist social constructionist claims, while they flirt with the kind of essentialism championed by cultural feminism – and, ultimately, contribute to the conversation the mediating idea of "gender expectations." One's idea of oneself as a gendered person is, as Feinberg and Green indicate, both the "natural" state which gets constructed *against*, and that which can be retroactively (re)constructed. As I will show later with Shani Mootoo's work, such complications of otherwise-stringent notions of "natural" and "unnatural" have the potential to transform the ways in which the larger human culture interacts not just with trans people, but with ecological phenomena such as animals and landscapes.

A Non-Teleological Transgenderism?

One might argue that the stories of individuals such as Green – who identifies as a man, though one with a transgender history – represent an investment in teleology, the logic that inheres in developmentalism and in the notion of puberty in particular. (Indeed, terms such as FTM or "female-to-male" establish in miniature a kind of developmental narrative that points to a particular end.) Why would one begin transitioning, we might ask, if one were not invested in a specific material and/or visible outcome? One might also argue that the transgendered body is fetishized to an extreme degree. After all, the surgical and chemical interventions that

transgenderism so often entails seem to mark the trans body as the ultimate consumer product. But works such as Green's actually provide us with counterevidence for such claims. For one thing, in concentrating on the psychic ramifications of transitioning – particularly, on thwarted childhood expectations and the trauma of transgendered puberty – these works prompt us to look beyond material concerns, to focus on processes rather than products. After all, while the very title of Green's work, *Becoming a Visible Man*, suggests a hoped-for endpoint, it also foregrounds the never-ending work of “being” any gender at all. Moreover, Green's title utilizes the vocabulary of puberty (“becoming” often connotes the incipience of the pubescent body), only to problematize its implications by telling us a tale of dissonant and “do-over” puberties.

We might also note that, despite the interest and comfort trans people such as Green take in establishing a “new” gender, transitioning is not always a one-way street – which normative puberty and other forms of progress are imagined to be. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess Goldberg actually returns to life as a female after experiencing extreme physical violence as a trans person. The program of disappearance Stone refers to is actually not an option for Jess: it is potentially deadly within hir gender-conservative working-class environment, that which finds any female bid at male status to be a punishable offense. And disappearing, or passing, threatens to make Jess an outcast from the novel's politically fraught post-1950s queer communities, communities in which masculine gender roles were coming under fire from lesbian-feminists. Jess wonders, “Can you go back to being a butch [here meaning a trans person, or what ze calls a “he-she”] later, when it's safe to come out?” (145). The answer, for hir and for many real-life individuals is, “yes;” you *can* transition back and forth, and Jess does just that. But ze ultimately decides to live as an openly gender-queer person rather than to pass as a man. The trans body in this schema certainly does not appear as the commodity fetish to end all commodity fetishes, and it certainly

does not ratify white male privilege.¹⁹ *Stone Butch Blues* counters the classical narrative form so common to trans stories: Jess's story might end relatively happily, but it does not end on the triumphant, conclusive note of a coherently-gendered body, one that quells the extreme disequilibrium of hir puberty.

When we put the concept of transgenderism in conversation with feminist theory yet again – in particular, with feminist body theory – we see further the ways that the trans body potentially complicates, rather than endorses, charges of teleology and fetishism. In *Technologies of the Gendered Body* (1996), Anne Balsamo notes that non-queer and non-trans contemporary bodies are highly modified and sculpted, often to (further) instantiate one's gender – not unlike the efforts of trans people to instantiate *their* sense of genderedness through transitioning. She argues that women's cosmetic surgery is an example of the “obsessive reinscription of dualistic gender identity in the interactions between material bodies and technological devices” (162). (We might add to her example hormone replacement therapy for menopausal women, breast reconstruction for female breast cancer patients, or even Viagra for men with erectile dysfunction.) Balsamo “borrows [Elizabeth] Grosz's insight ... that sexual difference is one form of ‘alterity’ that is both primary and constantly displaced [in order to] ... trace the ways in which various technological practices reproduce this ‘alterity’ as a gender identity for material bodies” (16). Such claims are, interestingly enough, in sympathy with transgender theorizations: Green asks why transsexuals are blamed for concretizing the binary sex system, when machinations such as those Balsamo refers to run rampant in larger society. As he argues,

Changing one's sex is just one way of changing one's body, and a sex change is not necessarily part of a *search for perfection* or a reification of stereotypes. The reality of gender is that anyone who has not opted for androgyny has ... accepted the binary gender

system ... so why imply that transsexual people have any greater share of responsibility for reinforcing that binary? (90, my emphasis)

Of course, there *are* pertinent reasons why this implication is so common: for one thing, trans identity and sex reassignment surgery have historically gone hand in hand, meaning that people who have, for example, transitioned from male to female, have changed their bodies to both behave and appear feminine(ly). But this connection can be traced back to the technomedical complex's devotion to cultural norms: psychiatrists have insisted upon psychic and body alignment for trans people, particularly when it comes to the genitals and breasts. A male-to-female person, for example, is compelled to get rid of her penis and acquire a surgically-constructed vagina. According to Stone, even when trans people agree to these norms, medical authorities try to ensure that genital reconstruction is understood as utterly integral to their transitioning. Access to surgery, in fact, has often been contingent upon the proper response to the question, "Suppose that you could be a man [or woman] in every way except for your genitals; would you be content?" (Stone 13). Stone explains, "there are several possible answers, but only one ['no'] is clinically correct ... Under the binary phallocratic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized, only one body per gendered subject is 'right.' All other bodies are wrong" (13).

The genitals and breasts, in this scenario, become fetishes along the lines of the trans body as a whole, and transitioning is reduced in the cultural imagination to the acquisition of normative, gender-binaristic body parts. Thus, theorists such as Judith Shapiro claim that criticism of trans people's focus on "the genitals [or, in general, on the body] as obsessive or fetishistic" (as quoted in Stone 13) is misguided: besides the fact that binaristic gender codes govern all bodies in mainstream culture, the trans body has historically been even more

stringently interpellated through these codes via the medical establishment. While a woman seeking breast augmentation, for example, is not asked to justify her decision on the basis that it will make her feel more like a woman, or more attractive to the opposite sex (though such statements are certainly legion in popular culture), trans people seeking surgery have long been asked to do precisely that. As Stone argues, “the transsexuals for whom gender identity is something different from and perhaps irrelevant to physical genitalia are occulted by those for whom the power of the medical/psychological establishments, and their ability to act as gatekeepers for cultural norms, is the final authority for what counts as a culturally intelligible body” (13). The transgendered body, then – whether fantasy or material end-product – might not constitute a fetish for its owner *in and of itself*; we might more accurately describe it as an object fetishized by a technomedical complex that literally capitalizes on bodily transformations.

This process of fetishization is of a piece with the developmentalist resolve that particular bodily structures mean particular things. Recall Freud’s claim that pubertal developments such as erections mark heteroreproductive capability; if a post-adolescent penis signals reproductive heterosexual manhood, a person cannot live as a female and still retain her penis. The imperative to get rid of the penis and replace it with a vagina thus begins to appear starkly as a normative machination, an attempt to ascribe to an imaginary system appropriate material evidence – an ascription much easier, and much more subtle, when the body at hand is “normal;” when, for example, a non-trans female “already” has the vagina to which womanhood is ascribed. In critically reminding us of these facts, Green’s and Stone’s work reclaims gender transitioning from its precedented normativizing framework and posit it as one of those “gestures or analytical models which,” in Annamarie Jagose’s words, can “dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender[,] and sexual desire [sexuality]” (3).

Transgenderism as Anti-Capitalism

Thus far, I have hinted at the fact that such anti-teleological, anti-authoritarian reworkings are also deeply affined with anti-capitalism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977) illustrates more explicitly how such reworkings militate against dominant materialist epistemologies.²⁰ *Anti-Oedipus* considers the story of Daniel Paul Schreber, a paranoid schizophrenic whose *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) has provided fodder for theorists including Freud, Lacan, and Certeau. In *Illness*, Schreber describes the spontaneous growing of breasts on his body – part of his belief that he was becoming a woman. Of this passage, Deleuze and Guattari state, “nothing here is representative; rather, it is all life and lived experience: the actual, lived emotion of having breasts does not resemble breasts, it does not represent them” (19). Deleuze and Guattari's description collapses the privilege of the signifier: it doesn't just suggest that signifier (breasts) and signified (the feeling or knowledge of having breasts) are equal, but that the signifier might actually be irrelevant. Schreber's breasts are, we might say, the anti-penis vis-à-vis the phallus. As literal anti-matter, they cannot be forced into a signifying economy, much less one that ratifies gendered divisions.

This description both illustrates and validates desire as productive. Schreber has breasts because he *believes* he has breasts. This claim is troubling not only to the medicalized transsexual imaginary – that which sees the (nearly) normative body as the tangible goal to be pursued to the end – but also to the systems of commodification that drive capitalism. As Deleuze and Guattari go on to argue,

When the theoretician reduces desiring-production to a production of fantasy, he is content to exploit ... the idealist principle that defines desire as a lack, rather than a

process of production ... Clement Rosset puts it very well: every time the emphasis is put on a lack that desire supposedly suffers from as a way of defining its object, 'the world acquires as its double some other sort of world, in accordance with the following line of argument: there is an object that desire feels the lack of; hence the world does not contain each and every object that exists; there is at least one object missing ... hence there exists some other place that contains the key to desire. (26)

The result, then, is an ever-insatiable quest for the product/object, a quest that fetishizes material things such as "real" (or "better") breasts, only to find them lacking. Deleuze and Guattari's analysis reminds us of how Feinberg and Green have suggested that childhood expectations and desires created their adult bodies – minimizing or even eliding the "real" work of surgeons and psychiatrists. In turn, to say that the desired-for or expected is not actually absent from the world (for example, that Green's adult male body was never "missing") is to refuse to reduce it to the status of a commodity fetish, and to make self-determined, autonomous transgenderism conceptually possible. (If something was never "missing," it cannot be so strange that one simply "finds" it.) Moreover, although Schreber was undeniably mentally ill,²¹ his experience ironically speaks to the fact that not all gender transitions fit into the medical establishment's definition of transsexualism – which has been "validated" as a psychiatric problem in order to justify medical intervention. (Not surprisingly, Marie Mehl calls this validation a "Pyrrhic victory" [as quoted in Stone 3].) Like Feinberg's and Green's texts – which do not take as their telos the technomedical complex's "results," and which grant authority instead to the transgendered child – Deleuze and Guattari's work on Schreber reminds us that not all gender transitions need be staged, or even understood, through medical intervention. Sheer desire, privileging the signified over the signifier, minimizes or even supplants such intervention.

The complex life trajectories that Feinberg and Green describe – in the latter’s case, that from girl to woman; then into the temporary identity of butch lesbian; then to the “exceptional” state of transgenderism, which is accompanied by a conceptual move “back” to boyhood and then “forward” to man – appear to be, simply put, inefficient. As capitalism is premised on models of efficiency, these trajectories defy the capitalist ideals governing both labor and bodies. Feinberg’s and Green’s accounts speak to a body with “extraneous” parts (in this case, breasts and female reproductive organs), to a consciousness that takes various detours (tomboyism, butch lesbianism), and to a psychosomatic complex that requires intervention into the body’s “normal” processes of development. Indeed, the manipulations associated with transgenderism, be they self-induced and simple (e.g. binding one’s breasts or tucking one’s penis between the legs) or medically-induced and invasive (e.g. double mastectomy or estrogen therapy) invoke a body in defiance of our fantasies of machine-like efficiency – even as those modified bodies may be machine-like in their technological dimensions. This vision of transgenderism speaks to the larger impetus behind *Anti-Oedipus*’s notion of the “body without organs”: to imagine bodies (and world at large) not as self-contained systems that can only be “added to” or “modified” – thus molesting their holy integrity – but as containing undetermined potential, as experiencing constant flows and interactions with other bodies, and as consisting of unstable matter.²²

In *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1998), Susan Sontag describes the frequency with which the body is “compare[ed] to ... complex, integrated systems, such as a machine or an economic enterprise” (7); thus, the anomalous experiences of disease and illness are “experienced by many as ... unjust, a betrayal by one’s body” (24). While I am not interested in further pathologizing the transgendered body, we might take a moment to reflect on Sontag’s observations. In light of the first statement, we can see how a transgendered child’s growth into the “wrong” gender, and

their (potential) attempts at “correcting” that gender, are often read as a failure of the economic enterprise that is the human body. And in light of the second, the anomalous experience of entering puberty as a transgendered child, while certainly not comparable to disease, produces the same feelings of “betrayal by one’s body.” This “betrayal,” though, does not necessarily have negative connotations when read *against*, rather than through, dominant discourse: it dislodges the fantasy of continuity from childhood to adulthood – the throughline that, while it might not exist for *anyone*, nonetheless creates problems for many. And the fact that trans people, like the ill persons to whom Sontag refers, experience such “betrayal by [their] bodies,” means that the trans person is not the only kind of person who experiences extreme alienation from one’s body; who finds oneself out of sync with the normative temporalities and trajectories of developmentalism; or who finds oneself with a body that requires “extraordinary” intervention. The experience of transgenderism, then, in its unique vicissitudes, provides a site for understanding how human bodies at large are measured against ideals of productivity, singularity, and efficiency – and how “disease” justifies interventions on those bodies that do not measure up.

Perhaps not surprisingly, several trans theorists have described strict adherence to gender norms in terms of capitalist ideals. As Kate Bornstein argues in *My Gender Workbook* (1998), gender represents “greed, acquisition, and [the] human need to belong” (37). Bornstein does not directly indict trans people in such allegations, though ze speaks from the position of a person who transitioned from male to female and then disavowed hir female status, refusing to see hirself as “stable” or “complete” post-transition. Somewhat unexpectedly, then, while these kinds of “post-transsexual” stances appear quintessentially late capitalist – they seem of a piece with the postmodern tendency toward appearances over “reality,” the (alleged) end of grand

narratives, the dissolution of strict binary codes, and so forth – these stances stress their commitment to capitalist critique. Returning to *Stone Butch Blues*, we remember that Jess Goldberg is a working-class laborer whose coming to trans consciousness is punctuated by her increasing class consciousness and efforts as a union organizer; in her 1997 historical survey *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg figures transgender oppression as a specifically class-related issue that we might trace far back into history. In proceeding to do so, she defines trans oppression as a byproduct of class inequality characterized by gender inequality – and, in some instances, as the specific result of a rising capitalism’s attempt to quash alternative economies and social systems.²³

Feinberg’s historical work has been criticized for its sweeping generalizations, and for its insistence on a transhistorical definition of “transgender.”²⁴ But I propose that we read such work not as transgender *history*, per se, but rather as transgender *theory*: as a way of conceiving of transgenderism as a politicized identity whose articulation is often premised upon critiques of paradigms such as human developmentalism, the progress narrative more generally, and capitalism particularly. For example, at the crux of *Transgender Warriors*’s investigation is the Marxist-feminist observation that “the oppression of women began with the cleavage of society into male-dominated classes based on private ownership of property and the accumulation of wealth” (51). Gender deviance on either side of the gender binary, then, particularly at the age when proper gender identities are seen to really “matter,” throws a wrench into the workings of this gender-stratified economy – and thus is punished. Hereby, Feinberg produces feminist work that acts against the charges of misogyny that so many feminist theorists pin on gender transitioning. These impulses mark Feinberg’s work, like Green’s, as an example of wresting the conversation around transgenderism away from the technomedical complex, while remaining

cognizant of the multiple implications and effects of that complex. This work counters the cultural image of the trans person as a mere product of the Western, white, male-centric, technological triumph over chaos and incoherence; a creature forever caught up in the imperatives of (post)modern development.

Organic Transitions: *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*

This section focuses on two Caribbean novels, Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and Trinidadian writer Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, works that extend anti-teleological and anti-capitalist analyses, and the concept of puberty, into the realm of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. In the case of *Cereus*, I will also show that the representation of transgendered characters who undergo "natural," puberty-like transitions contributes to the formulation of what I will call a "queer ecocriticism" – an assemblage of feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist thinking that has critical implications for the novel's postcolonial setting.²⁵

Some preliminary statements about context will clarify the import of my analyses. The Caribbean, in contrast to the settings of *Stone Butch Blues* and *Becoming a Visible Man*, is a region that acutely reflects the racist, anti-indigenous, and otherwise subjugating exploits of Western capitalism. Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls "the history of the Caribbean ... one of the main strands in the history of capitalism" (5); he describes the Caribbean plantation as a machine that "produced no fewer than ten million African slaves and thousands of coolies (from India, China, and Malaysia)," and "turned out mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism ... African underdevelopment ... imperialism, wars, [and] colonial blocs" (9), among other devastating products. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have investigated the ideological underpinnings of such colonial projects, claiming that

the dark Other of European Enlightenment stands as its very foundation just as the productive relationship with the ‘dark continents’ serves as the economic foundation of the European nation-states. ... The colony stands in dialectical opposition to European modernity, as its necessary double and irrepressible antagonist. (115)

Recently, a handful of scholars have begun to investigate how such imperial mindsets have impacted the landscapes of postcolonial regions, quite literally. For example, the editors of the recent volume *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* (2005) point out that “there is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and settlement than the Caribbean” (1). This fact gives Mootoo’s articulation of a radical ecocritical politics through, and alongside, transgenderism, its traction: troubling neat oppositions such as “nature vs. culture” and “natural vs. unnatural,” it highlights the devastating ways that such oppositions have been imposed upon places as well as bodies.

At the same time that an anti-capitalist figuration of transgenderism and a queer ecocriticism might seem like sensible outgrowths of a critical Caribbean perspective, two specific contradictions abound. But these contradictions, I argue, make *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* all the more contentious as revisionary works.

First, several Caribbean islands, Jamaica in particular, have come under scrutiny in recent years due to their cultural and legislated homophobia – though popular representations of this homophobia tend to isolate specific matters, focusing, for example, on the much-debated anti-gay lyrics of reggae artists such as Buju Banton and Beenie Man.²⁶ Further complicating this picture are certain theoretical and intellectual silences: as Heather Smyth has pointed out, “alternative sexualities are a form of diversity that has been excluded from the imagining of

Caribbean creolization” (“‘Roots beyond Roots’” 21). In fact, Smyth draws on Robert Young and Jarrod Hayes to point not just to the “heterosexism and homophobia” endemic to some postcolonial thought, such as the *créolité* of Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant (22), but also to the masculinist heterocentrism inherent in models of hybridity and creolization. As she states, “despite the different histories and cultural contexts that shape models of cultural ‘mixing,’ these elisions [of queerness and queer theoretical models] and prejudices appear to be shared across a range of theories of difference” (2). While *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* are not theoretical texts as such, I argue that they nonetheless offer a corrective to these elisions, locating space in their respective visions of Caribbean life for queerness and transness to be articulated as indigenous positions rather than foreign impositions. In doing so, as I will describe, they treat skeptically the idea that “developed” nations provide the best models for humane treatment of sexual and gender Others such as trans people.

Secondly, as the editors of *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* note, “despite the history of ecological imperialism ... and a rich literary inscription of local landscapes, ecological concerns seem surprisingly absent in Caribbean criticism” (26). We might go further, and ponder the possibility that such criticism has either overlooked or simply been uninterested in how certain Caribbean novelists have articulated ecocritical viewpoints like those put forth in *Cereus*. As I will show, not only do *Heaven* and *Cereus* directly grapple with homo- and transphobia, along with capitalism, imperialism, and other issues pertinent to their particular settings, they do so from a complex perspective: one that is aware of and yet not enthralled by technomedical processes, and one that is sympathetic to the ecological and the organic without leaving unquestioned binaries such as “nature-vs.-culture,” and “the-natural-vs.the-unnatural.”

Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* continues the story of Jamaican repatriate Clare Savage

from her 1984 novel *Abeng*. Born into relative affluence as a light-skinned Jamaican of mixed blood, Clare moves with her mother, father, and sister to the United States as a young girl. Encountering prejudice where they once found privilege, the Savage family is forced to pass as white – until Clare’s newly-politicized mother, Kitty, begins acting out in defiance of U.S. racial hierarchies. Kitty eventually returns to Jamaica with Clare’s sister, while Clare goes on to attend university in the U.S. and England. During a brief Jamaican sojourn during a college vacation, she meets someone who haunts her until her eventual resettlement in her estranged homeland: the dark-skinned Harry/Harriet. A self-described “fairy guerilla” (13) from a troubled lower-class background, Harry/Harriet becomes Clare’s best friend, occasional lover, and eventual comrade in the revolutionary group that takes up residence on Clare’s grandmother’s land.²⁷ Harry/Harriet is a powerful voice for anti-colonialism and regional memory, stirring similar sentiments in Clare in no small part because the former insists on interpellating the latter as a Jamaican – despite her complicated geographical background and her initial ambivalence about her place as a light-skinned person in radical politics. But it is not just Harry/Harriet’s activism that provides the novel with its political drive: transgendered consciousness is shown, through this character, to be mutually reinforcing, and perhaps even mutually constitutive of, such activism. That is, Cliff’s figuring of Harry/Harriet provides a critique of colonial oppression under Western capitalism and “progressiveness,” *and* asserts a key place for the transgendered individual – so long, and perhaps still, understood precisely as a *symbol of* Western capitalism and “progressiveness” – within that movement of critique.

One of the ways that Cliff achieves this figuration is by staging Harry/Harriet’s transgenderism not as a major medical event, but as an ongoing process. Though couched in

some of the same terms as puberty – it is spontaneous, organic, and requires no outside intervention – it defies pubertal logic. For one thing, the novel and characters treat this transition with a certain amount of vagueness, refusing to see it as all-determining. For example, at one point while Harry/Harriet is in Jamaica, becoming increasingly politicized, Clare receives a postcard from him in England that states, “I find myself closer to my choice, girlfriend. How about you? Jamaica needs her children – I repeat myself, I know” (140). The phrase “my choice” is at once emphatic and ambiguous; it privileges individual self-determination over official taxonomies, but does not specify exactly what that choice entails. And the proximity of “my choice” to the sentiment that “Jamaica needs her children” – might “my choice” refer to *both* transitioning and joining the anti-colonial revolutionary movement? – makes inseparable gender freedom and freedom from colonial domination.

Later in the novel, when Clare and Harry/Harriet meet after a long separation, Clare addresses her friend as “Harry.” Ze gently corrects her, stating, “Harriet, now, girlfriend ... finally.” “Then you have done it?” Clare asks. “No, man,” Harry/Harriet replies. “Cyann afford it. Maybe when de revolution come ... but the choice is mine, man, is made. Harriet live and Harry be no more ... you know, darling, castration ain’t de main t’ing ... not a-tall” (168). In its simplicity, this exchange offers us many provocative threads. To begin with, Clare’s question, “you have done *it*?” invokes the long history of teleological narratives of transsexualism – those fixated on the end-point of the surgically normalized, coherent body, and on genital reconstruction in particular. In turn, Harry/Harriet’s firmly decentering response, that “castration ain’t de main t’ing,” criticizes this history, while not fully disavowing the possibility of surgical interventionism. Thus, even before the term “transgenderism” had been introduced to the world, *Heaven* ushers in the possibility of theorizing a trans identity outside of the narrow

limits of the medical establishment – without invalidating the choices of those who remain within those limits.

In deflecting attention away from genitalia, while not wholly eliding the question of the material body, Harry/Harriet offers a critical take on the developmental discourses that confer meaning on those parts. (It is no coincidence, I would argue, that Harry/Harriet employs a term perhaps most closely associated with Freud’s work on genitalia and psychosomatic development – rather than a term such as “sex reassignment,” “surgery,” “genital reconstruction,” or even “vaginoplasty” – only to disavow that term’s centrality.²⁸) In insisting that “Harriet live,” despite hir possession of a penis, Harry/Harriet retroactively revises the discourses that have sutured possession of a penis to (heteroreproductive) manhood – those same discourses which have prompted Clare to assume that if “Harriet live,” Harry’s penis must be no more. Harry/Harriet also defies the positivist visual epistemology through which seeing (a penis) is believing (that that person is or feels male). The trans body and its genitals are defetishized, and the signifier decoupled from the signified; whereas Schreber did not have to have material breasts in order to feel endowed with breasts, neither does Harry/Harriet need to remove hir penis to experience not having one.

Harry/Harriet’s description of her transition invokes hir specific socioeconomic position, as a non-white (trans) person in a postcolonial territory. As she states, “Cyann afford it. Maybe when de revolution come.” But ze then asserts hir (desired) independence from that economy by stating, “But the choice is mine.” In this schema, the trans person simply refuses to be a product of Western imperialism. In fact, she (re)imagines surgical transsexuality not as something created and sustained by Western authorities – as Stone’s and Stryker’s histories show it to be – but, paradoxically, something that can more likely take place *after* such authorities have been

overthrown. The choice to simply, organically, let “Harriet live” circumvents the historical narrative in which Western medicine and technology “save” the “backwards” person – the poor person, the non-white person, the Third World person, as well as the non-straight person, the gender-dissonant person; all of which positions Harry/Harriet occupies.

Harry/Harriet’s take on castration provides a notable parallel to his earlier description of his childhood rape by a British soldier – further illustrating the ways in which this vision of transgenderism is tightly tied to anti-colonialism. Ze insists that “[the rape] did not make me the way I am ... I was born this way, that I know. Not just sun, but sun and moon” (128).

Harry/Harriet here denies the normative causality that inheres in developmentalism, and which seeks to explain the transgendered individual’s discordance: disturbance in the process of adolescent development (sexual abuse, specifically domination by another man) leads to a disturbance in the end-product of the adult individual (transgenderism). Harry/Harriet also insists that this rape should not be metaphorized in the service of anti-colonial activism; as ze tells Clare, “I have been tempted in my life to think *symbol* – that what he did to me is but a symbol for what they did to all of us, always bearing in mind that some of us, many of us, also do it to each other. But that’s not right. I only suffered what my mother suffered” – in being raped by her white master and bearing the half-black, half-white offspring Harry/Harriet – “no more, no less” (129, emphasis original). To metaphorize this experience would strip it of its singular horror, much as Sontag claims in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) that the symbolization of disease strips patients of their ability to grapple with their particular afflictions. But perhaps more importantly, metaphorizing this rape would make the trans person appear like yet a further degraded offshoot of foreign influence – the ultimate hybridized product (half-white, half-male or “half-sun”) of colonial influence. Harriet entertains, only to decline, the possibility that dominant forces have

forged hir (trans, Jamaican) psyche, just as ze declines to believe that those forces hold definitive responsibility for her (trans, mixed-race) body.

Rejecting the etiology around queerness as a product of sexual abuse keeps queerness from being read as a “sickness” or reaction-formation, something Harry/Harriet is clearly invested in. And rejecting the etiology around queerness as a product of foreign influence *as well as* of sexual abuse has clear import within the context of Caribbean anti-colonialism in general, and that of *Heaven*’s revolutionary Jamaica in particular: it does not engage in an ahistoric, “slave” mindset, or what Harry/Harriet refers to as “the danger” of “tak[ing] the master’s past as our own” (127). But rejecting the etiology around *transness* as a product of foreign influence as well as of sexual abuse is perhaps even more salient to a critical perspective on that context: in dismissing the authority of “developed” medical technology, Harry/Harriet refuses to engage at all with the idea that Jamaica and other regions like it are underdeveloped or “immature” in relation to global superpowers. Caribbean trans people, in this model, are not waiting to be “saved” or “delivered,” or to have their second puberties enacted for them – just as Harry/Harriet’s Jamaica does not seek to come into “maturity” through colonial or any other means.

Refusing to be implicated in the global discourse of transgenderism (not to mention the global discourse of “maturity”) points to the unique and varied experiences of trans people in different contexts, and suggests that those identities are often achieved in problematic, though invisibilized, terms. As Rosemary Hennessey states in relation to GLBT identities, “recognizing that signs are sites of social struggle ... [should lead] us to inquire into the social conditions that enable and perhaps even foster the slipping and sliding of signification.” She argues that “one consequence [of not making such inquiries] is the risk of promoting an up-dated, postmodern,

reinscription of the bourgeois subject's fetishized identity. Alienation of any aspect of human life from the network of social relations that make it possible constitutes the very basis of fetishization" (44). Letting Harriet "live" is perhaps an even more fraught prospect than it originally appears, then: normative causality would attribute hir gender identity, (potentially) her body, and her overall consciousness to colonial power. And her well-being could be narrowly, uncritically premised upon the "liberal," "enlightened" Western frameworks that have "made [gender transitioning] possible" and acceptable, to paraphrase Hennessey. But Harriet neither allows hir existence to be read as a confirmation of those causal schemes, nor disavows her transness because it appears to be implicated in them; ze demurs to engage dialectically with colonial modernity, which would force her to stand as either its "irrepressible antagonist," as Hardt and Negri put it, or its converted apologizer. Ze instead rewrites the colonial narrative of native dependence and Western triumph, and the trans narrative of transgendered dependence and technomedical triumph – showing them to be not metaphors for one another but interdependent paradigms – in order to make room for himself.

When we consider recent criticism of *Heaven*, we can better understand the stakes of seeing Carribean transness on its own terms, rather than as a metaphor for larger issues. Much of this critical work tends to see Harry/Harriet as assimilable to gay-and-lesbian models or to models of creolization. To take two examples, Timothy Chin argues that "the ambivalence of the Caribbean gay/lesbian subject is literally embodied by the character Harry/Harriet" (137), while Nada Elia argues that "Harry/Harriet never undergoes a physical transformation, remaining ever dual in body, as indeed is the fate of all Creoles, diasporans and biracials for whose transformation is impossible" (353). Of course, one cannot fully separate out "queerness," or sexual deviance, from "transness," or gender deviance. And Harry/Harriet is certainly sexually

deviant in that ze desires women. But Cliff has created not just a queer character, but a *transgendered* queer character, a fact that has particular sociopolitical ramifications: while gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have certainly been “medicalized” alongside transgendered persons (both have been classified as mental disorders in the *DSM*, though only Gender Identity Disorder, the descendant of transsexualism, presently remains), these histories have not been commensurate. As I have noted, the diagnosis of transsexualism or Gender Identity Disorder is often applied in order to justify surgery or other treatment. That is, trans people are pathologized in order to allow for intervention – not simply because they seek intervention. Also, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals have not been imagined as *physically* constructed by medical technology as trans people have, and the former have therefore not been implicated in the “triumphs” of Western medical technology in the same ways as the latter. Finally, while creolization is a powerful, undeniable touchstone for Caribbean fiction, it is not without its problems – as Smyth’s work on the heteronormativity of the concept indicates. Harry/Harriet’s resistance to the image of herself as part-colonizer when it comes to hir gender identity – ze insists that ze was “naturally” born “not just sun, but sun and moon” (128) – and her subsequent insistence that “the choice is mine, man, is made. Harriet live and Harry be no more” (168) instead invoke the possibility of the colonial (trans) subject determining hir “fate,” to repurpose Elia’s term, rather than being consigned to one.

It is not incidental, then, that Harry/Harriet’s character trains as a medicinewoman in both institutionalized and grassroots contexts. These facts suggest that, while trans people might never escape the history of their condition’s medicalization, they can at the very least pursue alternatives to that near-totalizing form of knowledge. Importantly, Harry/Harriet’s efforts as a local care-giver evince a deep loyalty to her homeland, despite the prejudices of her fellow

islanders – a detail that highlights the untenability of the queer/trans person’s characterization as a foreign corruption or incursion. As Cliff’s narrator observes, ze “had been studying the healing practices. At the university and with old women in the country ... Had [the locals] known about Harriet, they would have ... harr[ied] her to the harbor – perhaps. And still she was able to love them. How was that?” (171). Just as hir anti-colonial politics cannot be separated out from hir transgenderism, Harry/Harriet cannot allow hir transgenderism (or, perhaps more precisely, the discrimination it occasions) to prevent her from being bound through anti-colonial politics to other Jamaicans.

In “‘A Man Who Wants to be a Woman’: Queerness as/and Healing Practices in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*,” Elia further describes Harry/Harriet as a healing figure in terms of hir friendship with Clare Savage. Elia specifically notes the scene in which Clare “is hospitalized with a (highly symbolic, if viscerally painful) uterine infection that renders her sterile and make her question ‘her future as a woman’ ... This is the moment Harry/Harriet picks to explain to Clare about her own circumstances [as a self-determined woman]” (355). Elia reads this scene as an example of how Harry/Harriet’s acceptance of contradictions provides a positive model for the conflicted, psychically divided Clare. If we focus on the scene’s specific references to gender, we might also recognize the suggestion that womanhood is a contingent prospect even for “*real*” women – in this case, Clare. If we link this scene back to Feinberg’s description of pubescent dissonance and distress, and to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, we see that it participates in a similar kind of work: reminding us that those structures and capabilities which arise at puberty need not determine one’s future gender or gender roles – and, conversely, that the *lack* of certain capabilities does not mean that one cannot *live* as a certain gender. Moreover, this scene highlights the medical establishment’s ability to regulate *all* gendered bodies, not just

transgendered ones. But in juxtaposing Clare's medicalized body with Harry/Harriet's self-determined body, Cliff imagines a space outside of this regulation: a space of anti-colonial gender autonomy.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Shani Mootoo presents the reader with another non-operative trans person who also happens to be a caregiver: the male (later to be female) nurse²⁹ Tyler. Tyler's story is intimately bound up, and quite literally so, with some of the same legacies that *No Telephone to Heaven* tackles, including colonialism, racism, and past sexual abuse: shuttling between Tyler's present-day first-person narration and an omniscient past narration, *Cereus* details Tyler's gender transition and his concurrent friendship with his patient Mala Ramchandin, as well as the story of Mala's traumatic past. In the past narrative, a white Englishman named Reverend Thoroughly triggers a complicated series of events by barring his adopted Indian son, Chandin Ramchandin, from entering into an interracial union with Thoroughly's biological daughter Lavinia. Chandin instead marries an Indian woman who eventually leaves him for Lavinia, forcibly abandoning the couple's two daughters, Mala and Asha, in the process. Over the proceeding years, Chandin sexually, physically, and mentally abuses his children. Mala eventually murders him and then has a mental breakdown, subsisting for the next several decades on the family's overgrown land and living in their ruinate house – until a chance encounter with the son of her childhood sweetheart, Ambrose Mohanty, brings attention to her condition. Mala ends up in Tyler's care at the Paradise Alms house, where the story begins.

Mootoo's novel, through narration, structure, imagery, and even design,³⁰ models and enacts a kind of queer vision, one that shifts the reader from the dominant and normative frames through which the world – including, but certainly not limited to transgendered people – is commonly viewed. As I will show, this vision takes the form of what we might call a “queer

ecocriticism” for the ways in which it tackles how humans tend to deploy the concept of “the natural,” and how we treat differentially that which falls within and outside its purview. To begin with, Tyler’s indigenous, transgendered voice presides over a large part of the novel; in order to navigate its storyworld, the reader must see through the eyes of a narrator who is not just in a uniquely disadvantaged minority position, but whose gender and name, and even those of hir partner, are unstable. (Tyler eventually identifies as “Ty,” while ze refers to hir female-to-male suitor, Ambrose Mohanty’s son Otoh, neé Ambrosia, as “Otty” by the end.) This experience of a queer, “trans-ed” vision is not just enacted through Tyler, but through the novel’s form. *Cereus* unfolds in a highly non-linear manner, with Tyler’s narration interspersed with flashbacks that are not directly attributable to hir. That is, they seem to be Mala Ramchandin’s memories, but it is not entirely clear who is enunciating them. In thus refusing the classical narrative imperatives of linearity, perspectival coherence/univocality, and even closure – the novel ends with a plea for a response from one of its characters, reminding us that the entire text is, literally, an “open letter” – *Cereus* rejects dominant understandings of time as teleological and progressive, insisting instead on the embeddedness of history in daily life. The novel thus assesses critically the discourses I have surveyed thus far, including those of puberty and Western advancement, and it also bears on those that have informed views of transgenderism. For one thing, it indirectly suggests that trans people need not erase or denigrate their past in order to exist in the present – though, of course, this might mean that others have to learn how to conceive of a single person in multiple and conflicting temporal dimensions at once.

Cereus’ peripheral characters also contribute to the novel’s queer/“trans”-ed vision, offering transgressive and recuperative ways of reading despite not being queer or trans themselves. The novel’s complex goals thereby become plain: it simultaneously privileges the

trans perspective by assigning it to the narrator-function (unlike *No Telephone to Heaven*), and demonstrates the necessity of perspectival diversity and multiplicity. One prominent perspective is that of Otoh's mother, Elsie Mohanty. When Mrs. Mohanty questions her female-to-male son about his plans to marry, she first generalizes, or "naturalizes," his condition by claiming that Otoh is "not the first or the only one of your kind in this place ... almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else." But she also accounts for the specifics of his experience by stating, "I want to talk with you about your situation ... every village in this place have a handful of people like you" (238). In fact, that prospect has prompted Mrs. Mohanty to so strongly consider the idea of multiple and shifting genders that she often wonders "if *who* I see [on the island] is really *what* I see" (238). Clearly, transgenderism is not a Western disease or possibility, and in fact it may be so common in Lantanacalara and the Caribbean as to rework the balance of rule and exception. That may be an overstatement, but the fact remains that the heterosexual, gender-normative Mrs. Mohanty's experience of having a transgendered child has prompted her to adopt a state of "queer vision," in which norms of power, definition, and stable identities no longer prove useful. The modernist/Enlightenment insistence on materiality as truth thereby comes into question as well.

Otoh's transformation is described as an organic one that operates outside of medical and parental prescription. As Mootoo describes it, Ambrose and Elsie "hardly noticed [at first] that their daughter was transforming herself into their son ... [Then] Elsie fully expected that he (she) would outgrow the foolishness ... But the child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled ... so much like an authentic boy that Elsie soon apparently forgot she had ever given birth to a girl" (109-110). This transition is quite miraculous, yet treated as credible: Mootoo states that "hours of ... exercise streamlined Ambrosia into an angular, hard-bodied creature and

tampered with the flow of whatever hormonal juice defined him. So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marveled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl” (110). In this scenario, medical technology is made irrelevant to gender transitioning, and medical expertise is winkingly satirized as “careless” rather than precise, accurate, or unassailable. Mootoo’s equivocal diction, moreover, playfully bespeaks the agency of the trans person: the nurse and doctor merely “attended” the birth, like passive spectators at an event.

Later on, folk wisdom is seen to trump not only medical expertise but basic biological knowledge: in a humorous yet touching encounter, Ambrose Mohanty rubs Otoh’s face and says, “Son, perhaps if you were to use a razor on your face, you might encourage the growth of some hair” (145). This encounter, perhaps not coincidentally, follows Otoh’s decision to act in his father’s place to bring Mala food – an obligation performed in penance for Ambrose’s abandonment of her many years before, when he realized she was a prisoner of her incestuous father. In gratitude to Otoh, Ambrose states, “you are indeed a reincarnation but not of a person per se, merely of a forgotten memory. You are a perfect replica of me in my prime” (144). Transgenderism, and not normative puberty, is the bodily change characterized here as inevitable; like the power of sheer will invoked in the image of shaving in order to grow hair, the forces of memory, penitence, reincarnation, and even familial inheritance override Otoh’s biologically-female body. These forces resonate with the notion of gender expectations reported by Feinberg: even though Ambrose is the focus of his comments to his son, he nonetheless suggests that Otoh is the instantiation of the deferred, of the hoped-for; ze is not some new creature of technology but the appearance of that which was never “missing;” the biologization of dreams deferred.

Through characters such as Elsie and Ambrose Mohanty, *Cereus* demonstrates that the collapse of the dearly-guarded distance between “the human” and “the natural” and between “the transgendered” and “the human”/“natural” can be enacted through figures who are not explicitly queer or trans – in the same kind of refusal of privileged knowledge, adversarial positioning, and hierarchicalism that marks both queer theoretical and ecocritical thought. In addition to Mr. and Mrs. Mohanty, *Cereus* presents another “queer heterosexual,” the mute patient Mala Ramchandin, with whom Tyler enjoys an intense friendship. Mala’s own life story speaks to the experience of living on multiple temporal planes at once, the concept that Green’s trans memoir tenders. She lives at least part of the time in the past, as the child once known as “Pohpoh.” While we might guess that this split subjectivity is a result of her traumatic childhood, it also (or instead) seems to be a coping mechanism, a means of actually confronting the past to undo harm, or even rewrite history.³¹ When the police invade her home after the encounter with Otoh that leads to her being sent to Paradise Alms House, Pohpoh “appears” and is actually treated by Mootoo as a character in her own right, alongside her adult counterpart, Mala. When the police discover her father’s decaying body, Mala whispers to her child-self, “Remember him? Doh go near him” (183) – an admonition that could not save her from abuse when her father was alive. But now, she tells Pohpoh, “today is the last day that anybody will ever be able to reach you” (185); Pohpoh then runs out of the yard, “f[inds] herself above even the tallest trees,” and soars away until, “down below, her island was soon lost among others” (186). Like Green’s and Feinberg’s transgendered childhoods thwarted by puberty, here the person-that-never-was (in this case, the Mala free of abuse and restraint) is that which must be cared for, and allowed to live happily “again,” if only in the imagination.

While often lost in her own mind, Mala is subtly aware of the goings-on around her. In fact, she further builds up the novel's catalog of queer ecocritical approaches in treating gender transitioning as a biological and developmental process akin to, or, rather, *commensurate with*, those found in "nature." She actually intuits Tyler's impending transition, secretly stealing and bestowing a nurse's dress upon hir before Tyler has even disclosed or manifested hir desire to be seen as a woman. In fact, Mala's prescience seems to suggest that Tyler's transition is such a logical occurrence – plot-wise, corporeally, and psychically – that anyone in tune with humanity, or "nature," would see it coming. As Vera Kutzinski describes it, "as part of the closeness that develops between the two characters, Mala honors ... Tyler ... by stealing a nurse's uniform for her initially uncomprehending friend" (176). Once *ze does* comprehend Mala's intuition, Tyler appreciatively states that the woman "was not one to manacle *nature*, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (77, my emphasis). Through Mala's treatment, the trans person becomes part of the natural world – a radical move in itself, considering hir long medical-discursive history – and hir *transitioning*, so often conceived of as a commodifiable technomedical project, is likewise established as organic, initiated by a simple exchange between friends rather than negotiations between patient and medical authorities. This figuration is one of many iterations of Mala's ecocritical ethics, paralleling as it does her refusal to "intervene in nature's business" when living in the chaotic ruins of her overgrown house. As the omniscient narrator states, "flora and fauna left her to her own devices and in return she left them to theirs" (128).

Of course, Tyler does not have to rely solely on Mala's permission. *Ze* actively participates in the same blurring of the lines between (supposedly metaphorical) "human nature"

and (supposedly literal) “environmental nature.” As an example, we might consider one of Tyler’s many structurally-differentiated asides, like the apostrophe to Mala’s long-lost sister Asha on page 105. The page itself is distinguished by large, italicized type, and the printed images of a snail, a firefly, and an ant;³² as Isabel Hoving puts it, these illustrations subvert “the binary between the natural world and the cultural one” (157). In this section, Tyler refers to “the romantic blossoming of my knowledge of Otoh Mohanty,” hir “fertile imagination,” and the fact that hir “own life has finally – and not too late I might add – begun to bloom” (105). More than just employing a romanticized metaphors of the natural – not to mention those of puberty – Tyler and Mootoo actually trouble the notion that a “real” nature exists, to be opposed to metaphorical deployments thereof. That is, *Cereus* does not leave “nature” uncomplicated by simply inserting the trans person into that paradigm. Rather, it explores the connectivity between nature and (self-)culture, while showing that the “unnatural” is a term deployed for discriminatory purposes. And in fact, the manner in which Tyler describes the initial “bloom[ing]” of hir womanhood makes the queer position of being transgendered seem, paradoxically, like one of the most organic states of cultivation imaginable. After “reach[ing] for the [nurse’s] dress,” Tyler claims that hir “body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump ... I had thighs ... [and] rounded breasts” (176).

In describing hir (psychic?) gender transition as a high-speed type of puberty – not unlike that described by Schreber – Tyler makes it seem as effortless and unforced as puberty itself, and also seems to negate the necessity of any type of transsexual surgery. Though less explicit than *Heaven*’s castration discussion, this scene likewise recuperates transgenderism from its characterization as a purely modern, technocratized, and Western phenomenon. Moreover, while Kutzinski argues that the “nurse’s outfit represents to Tyler not so much femininity but

performative ‘possibilities’” (177, my emphasis), I argue that Mootoo is actually encouraging us to conceive of gender transgressions as acts that take place *organically*, if not spontaneously, in ways that would be impossible or at least unethical to “manacle.”

In making use of the concept of puberty, Tyler’s self-conception and Mala Ramchandin’s treatment of hir further outline a queer ecocritical paradigm, and show it to be animated by anti-capitalist values. Tyler’s emphasis on the fact that hir “bloom[ing]” has not come “too late” (105) suggests a way of approaching humans, animals, and other biological species not based on imperatives of productivity and time – i.e. what, and when, they can produce *for* “us,” or how they can become something useful and legible within “our” systems.

These imperatives are established in such moments as when policemen invade Mala’s house and discuss how much the birds she keeps would fetch them on the market. But the central ecological entity of the novel is the cereus plant that graces the cover, the title, the conclusion, and multiple sections throughout the text. As Mala’s Aunt Lavinia explains to her as a child, this strain of cactus blooms “‘only once a year ... [at which time] the flowers will offer their exquisite elegance for one short, precious night’” (54). Mootoo never explicitly draws out the implications of this flower’s peculiarity in the text, but we might draw out some on our own. To begin with, while one might think that the characters value the cereus for its rarity or beauty, the glimpse of beauty it does offer is so brief as to be negligible in quantificatory terms – meaning, we might say, that it confounds capitalistic logic. Moreover, rather than responding to the plant’s ethereality along the lines of “Western cultures ... [that] pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity [or productivity]” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 4), the characters in *Cereus* put forth an alternative value system: attentiveness, patience, and, as Tyler puts it, “promise” (72), must be their own rewards. As we have seen in my discussion of

adolescence in Chapter 2, puberty is frequently articulated in terms of “promise” – but an idealized end is always in sight. Moreover, the developmental discourse expects not a cyclical experience but a teleological one – proving further disingenuous the tendency, outlined in Chapter 2, to describe human development in terms of seasonality or organic things such as plants and flowers. (To discuss oneself in organic terms as Tyler does here is, thus, less a disingenuous metaphorizing than an attempt to actually take nature and the organic on its own terms; here, the human body *is*, for once, actually cyclical.) Working within a different framework, Tyler and Mala treat each other in similar ways to the cereus: they act ethically and even lovingly toward one another not because they want, or expect, to get anything back, but because it is fulfilling in and of itself to do so. (For example, without knowing if the mute and dazed Mala will ever respond to him or ever improve health-wise, Tyler takes this rejected patient on with good humor and fortitude.) We might say that, just as the cereus plant requires an overhaul of dominant value systems, so does the trans body: it requires consideration of the “promise[s]” that a normative puberty might actually *defer*, rather than to the product of that puberty. And it requires patience, as this specific type of adult body often takes much longer to be realized than the average one does.

These ethics are manifested in more concrete ways throughout Mala Ramchandin’s life, making her (pro-)queer and ecological impulses central to her characterization. Inspired by Lavinia’s lecture on the protection of snails, which comes directly before Lavinia and Mala’s mother leave Lantanacamara together as a couple, Mala performs various acts of deliverance from cruelty, such as saving a “colony of periwinkle snails ... vulnerable to the [schoolyard] torture squad’s delights” (92).³³ As Ambrose Mohanty puts it to his transgendered child many years later, “[she and I] fancied ourselves protectors of snails and all things unable to defend

themselves from the bullies of the world” (119). Notably, this sentiment does not make a self-conscious slide from animals to humans or from the local to the global. In other words, it is not that Mala Ramchandin’s or Ambrose Mohanty’s ethics of care are based in nature yet applicable to humans, or vice versa; neither is primary and thus both call out for the same ethical response. Metaphorization is hereby resisted, as it is in *Heaven*; the snail does not stand in for the trans, indigenous, or non-white person – or vice versa. Mala’s ethics at once recognize the specificity of different beings, and create a broad framework through which to act toward them.

Mootoo further illustrates this notion in depicting how Mala’s compassion is reciprocated. Throughout her life, nature responds to and cares for her in turn – for example, “it was no longer [her home’s back] wall that supported the succulent but the other way around” (115) – and select humans such as Tyler do the same. In fact, this model of socio-ecological non-dominance and reciprocity appears all the more powerful for the fact that its main practitioners never overtly theorize it until the very end of the novel. After returning from the Shivering Northern Wetlands, the newly-educated Ambrose Mohanty tells Mala that he has forsaken theology for entomology, because “unstated but certainly implied [in theology] is the assumption that humans are by far superior to the rest of all of nature ... [and] what’s more ... some of us are considered to be much lesser than others – especially if we are not Wetlandish or European or full-blooded white.” He concludes by asking, “Arrogant, isn’t it?” (198). While, somewhat ironically, Mala cannot fully comprehend Ambrose’s eloquent speech, she immediately gravitates to his intonations. As it seems, a highly-articulated ethics of care – one that might only be available to privileged academics, for example – is not a prerequisite for practice. In fact, while hermeneutics such as queer theory have rightly been criticized for their lack of concern for the day-to-day existence of individuals,³⁴ Mootoo provides quite a different picture: in *Cereus*,

radical theories such as a queer ecocriticism are not just applied to, but *emerge from*, compassionate, simple, everyday practices.

Mootoo has hinted at her own view of such ethics in telling Lynda Hall that “Mala gives up verbal language, while I use verbal language to detail her [experiences]. To my mind, her abandonment of this language and my use of it are only different sides of the very same coin” (111). Language supposedly distinguishes humans from the rest of nature, not to mention those in political/cultural power from creole or non-standard speakers, and children from adults. The refusal to privilege one mode of communication over another, however, is exemplary of the democratizing impulses of the queer ecocriticism *Cereus* outlines, and it illustrates the belief that all forms of oppression must be recognized in order for resistance on any front to be effective. Indeed, *Cereus* is explicit in identifying the erotic hierarchism of homophobia and heterosexism as products of, and not antidotes to, imperialism. Smyth reminds us of one of the purchases of this identification: as she states, many Caribbean writers find it “impossible ... to envision resistance to homophobia” – or to envision queerness – “as being anything other than ‘imported’ or imperialist” (“Sexual Citizenship” 143). In concentrating on the (mis)treatment of animals, insects, plants, soil, *and* gender-aberrant humans, and discussing the latter in terms usually associated with the former, Mootoo not only adds another category of analysis to the above list, she simultaneously demonstrates the interconnectivity of this (mis)treatment.

Mootoo’s and Cliff’s novels also describe a different type of connectivity: the conflation of transgenderism with homosexuality in the cultural imagination, to discriminatory ends. Both Harriet and Tyler are considered to be queer not simply by gender standards but also by standards of sexuality, long before their transitions. Before Mala gives Tyler the dress, in fact, there is no clear indication that ze is transgendered, only that ze is known to be a feminine queer

man. While one sympathetic gardener tells Tyler ze reminds him of his brother who was disowned for not being masculine enough, ze states that hir other coworkers make “no effort to hide [their] disdain for my ways” (10) – a phrase that suggests Tyler’s homosexuality (ze does, in fact, desire men) rather than hir transgenderism. Similarly, in speaking of hir schooling, Harriet recalls how a teacher “tell me since me is battyman-in-training, me should cleave to Plato. And him say that Jamaica is paradise, wasted on the likes of me. And the rest of the class laugh ... It was not the first time they held me to ridicule ... nor the last” (123). Not only does the teacher reduce Harry/Harriet’s gender-queerness to homosexuality – “Battyman” is Jamaican slang for a homosexual man – he makes Jamaicanness and queerness incompatible. These reminiscences indicate that the trans person is victimized under regimes of homophobia *as well as* transphobia, but also suggest that, perhaps for that very reason, one can never erase one’s past; to do so would be to capitulate to heteronormative standards. Tyler’s and Harriet’s boyhoods, especially in their traumatic dimensions, will always exist with them – but those boyhoods will not preclude womanhoods; they may even produce them. The school incident also signals the extreme difficulty of Harriet’s position as an activist: her fellow Jamaicans militate against her queerness (and transness), while hir experience of queerness (and transness) suggests that ze might find more tolerance elsewhere, in more “enlightened” lands. But Harriet rejects both the false patriotism of the former concept, as well as the lack of patriotism in the latter concept, insisting on the extreme contrariness of the transgendered, queer Jamaican.

It is relevant, then, to note that the objects of Tyler’s and Harriet’s desires mark them as “queer:” these protagonists do not uphold the standards of heteronormativity and psychosomatic coherence on which medicalized transsexualism has been focused.³⁵ For example, Harriet is a female-desiring, female-identified trans person; hir gender transitioning cannot be

characterized as an attempt at making properly-gendered sense of hir desires. While Tyler desires men, Mootoo pairs her with a female-to-male trans person. This match, while almost too perfect, resists the potential normativization of either character. For one thing, their transitions are a central part of their stories and even their romance; neither they nor the novel in which they appear disavow their “old” genders or cite such a disavowal as necessary for a happy life. These figures exist outside of the normativizing, medicalized view of gender transitioning; they indicate that trans identity is a unique position that is not fully assimilable to the difference of homosexuality, but by no means necessarily “straight.”³⁶

Conclusion

Virtually all human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, physical ability, mental ability, sexuality, location, or religious belief, have experienced or will experience puberty (provided they live long enough).³⁷ But I have insisted that it is not enough to simply point out puberty’s pervasiveness: in looking further, we can understand what it means for puberty to be *believed* pervasive. In Chapter 2, I showed that puberty-and-adolescence (as the two form a complex in twentieth-century definitions³⁸) are informed by the kind of teleology and firm temporal standards inherent to basic narrative form; we pity “late bloomers,” just as we cannot recognize as “good” stories texts in which no dramatic change or resolution occurs. More pointedly, as Nancy Lesko has shown, the human developmental schema that includes puberty-and-adolescence is a twentieth-century invention associated with nineteenth-century ideas about evolution and racial perfectionism; thus, this schema emphasizes “progress” as a central ethos.³⁹ And as Freud and other turn-of-the-century theorists have described it, puberty is a one-time event that announces the human capacity for biological reproduction – a capacity that, in turn, enables the cultural reproduction both of the normative developmental schema and

heteronormativity itself. Of course, one might not actually *act* on the capacity to biologically reproduce. But the concept of puberty nonetheless connotes “womanhood” for girl-bodies, and “manhood” for boy-bodies, setting those states up as expected ends.

So what happens when we encounter a figure whose life is *not* governed by those logics? Whose development is, as I have described, multi-directional, revisable, or “inefficient”? Whose body is said to have not one puberty but two? Whose “real” puberty provides the occasion for gender dissonance rather than continuity? Whose attempts to grapple with this dissonance do not necessarily lead to a teleological end-point or coherent life story? Most simply put, such a figure does not ratify puberty’s definition: a pervasive, predictive, one-time human experience. Thus, the scenarios I have cited are incomprehensible, so far out of the frame of human experience that they likely do not register as human at all. Perhaps there are other ways to account for, say, the fact that, even in the “enlightened” contemporary United States, murders of known trans people comprise the highest rate of hate crimes, or that most of these are defined as “overkill”: murders accompanied by extreme violence, rape, disfigurement, or dismemberment – including after death.⁴⁰ In any case, it is clear that the trans person largely fails to make sense within the structures that define what is human.

Indeed, in addition to puberty, the trans body also exists outside of the structure of the English language – not merely the language in which my four main texts were composed, but the dominant language globally. Though Feinberg and others have suggested various neologisms which I have employed throughout this chapter, they have not changed the fact that English has no pronouns to account for a person who identifies as more than one gender, who chooses not to identify as either male or female, or who chooses to identify as transgendered. Referential instability further compounds this state of affairs; individuals’ name changes such as Tyler to Ty,

Ambrosia to Otoh and to Otty, and Harry to Harry/Harriet to Harriet create linguistic inconsistencies –inconsistencies that mark this very chapter, in fact. These point to the extreme non-continuity of the trans body over time, a non-continuity highlighted at the pivotal juncture of puberty. Name changes, of course, are not unique to transgendered individuals. And postmodern theories have done much to establish the split subjectivity of all contemporary individuals. But, as I have shown in Chapter 2, modern ideas about human coherence are persistent and tenacious: name changes are, ideally, markers of developmental progress, not of radical discontinuity.

But a potential solution to all of these problems exists, as authorities such as the *DSM* have told us: medicalize this radical discontinuity, cure the disease it thereby becomes, and, further, disavow or even disappear evidence of that discontinuity – in turn, proving the saving powers of medicine and technology. Of course, this solution has wider implications. As gender discontinuity becomes a disease, its cure takes on the dimensions of hegemonic racial and cultural standards, beyond sexual and gender standards. As Hardt and Negri observe, “disease is a sign of physical and moral corruption, a sign of a lack of civilization. Colonialism’s civilizing project, then, is justified by the hygiene it brings” (135). Just as puberty is, as I have shown, a physical, psychological, and romantic ideal that is “progressive” in economic, cultural, and technological terms, so does medicalized transsexualism occupy the same status – regardless of the fact that only the latter is considered to be “natural.” Recall that the third criterion of transsexualism in the *DSM* is “having reached puberty”: only after puberty has proven its function of launching the adult gendered body can the trans person “knowledgably” act upon/against that body. This criterion, we might say, is premised on yet another dimension common to puberty and medicalized transsexualism: emphasis on visual proof. One’s adult body has to appear before one can determine one’s psyche to be at odds with that body, and the

resolution of that conflict requires changes in the material body, so as to evidence psychic-somatic coherence. Likewise, pubertal changes are quantified as evidence of their meaning: recall Freud's statement that "the *manifest* growth of the *external* genitalia ... [has] the *obvious sense* of being preparations for the sexual act" (74, my emphasis). As Ariadne Kane argues more generally, "American society ... has long assumed that one's gender perception, role, and presentation are all a function of biological anatomy, as visually ascertained at birth. This biocentric viewpoint [has] served as the basis for looking at sexual and gender variations for both sexologists and therapists." Returning to Hardt and Negri yet again, we see that the same visual epistemology inheres in colonial-imperial thought: "the barriers that divide the colonial world are not simply erected on natural boundaries, even though there are almost always physical markers that help naturalize the division. *Alterity is not given but produced*" (125, emphasis original).⁴¹

I have shown that texts such as *Stone Butch Blues*, *Becoming a Visible Man*, *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* engage in multi-faceted negotiations with these ideologies, rather than accepting them as part of the solution to transgendered "non-humanity." One of the most prominent features of these negotiations is that they show these ideologies to be not metaphors for or even analogues of one another, but mutually constitutive ideas. For example, trans dependence on the medical establishment is not just "symbol" for black subjugation to colonial forces, to use Harry/Harriet's pointed term, or vice versa. Both are driven by, to name just two things, conservative beliefs in visual epistemology, and faith in the saving powers of technology. This anti-metaphorization operates on at least two registers. First, it allows these texts to insist upon the ways that various exercises of power depend concretely on one another – no small point to one such as Harry/Harriet, who occupies multiple subaltern positions. Relatedly, these texts refuse to traffic in the facile comparisons between, for example,

non-white people and queer people,⁴² comparisons that elide the particular experiences of those who are *both* non-white and queer. Second, such anti-metaphorization allows these texts to recognize the specificity of material bodies, while also recognizing that, perhaps more importantly, particular meanings accrue to bodies, and quite tenaciously so. These texts, in fact, pick apart the ways in which the material body is subsequently used as evidence for the very meanings that have accrued to it. It is not just that *seeing is believing*, but that *believing is seeing is believing*, to put it one way.

While, as I have suggested, these operations work in favor of hegemonic values, these texts show that such values become widely diffused even among sympathetic parties. Clare Savage, for one – the queer, benevolent heroine of *No Telephone to Heaven* – assumes that, if her friend Harriet is to be understood as female, ze must have done “it:” removed the allegedly contrary visual evidence of her penis. But Harry/Harriet decouples the material from the dominant ideology that attends it in one simple sentence, sidestepping the particular suturing apparatus that all of these texts cite: medicalized transsexualism. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Harry/Harriet, Tyler, Mootoo, or any of the other characters and writers I have treated here believe there to be such a thing as a neutral body, one without meaning. But their interest lies in self-generated, self-determined meanings, ones that, say, do not necessarily treat the body as a product or endpoint, and which therefore do not always make sense. These texts often avoid discussions of genitalia, surgery, and other tangible or verifiable things not to deny their existence, but instead to focus on desires, expectations, processes, and conceptual counter-possibilities. Of course, these might very well *involve* material realism – Green, after all, undergoes sex reassignment surgery, and Harry/Harriet’s diction potentially holds out for “castration.” But they need not. And, in any case, they need not use the body in the same way

that dominant discourses have: as a signifier of particular meanings rather than a site at which to negotiate meaning. To be more specific, body modifications, when these texts do report them, can be read as the articulation of personal expectations or potentials – not as proofs to be roped into a system of conservative visual epistemology and biocentricity. What are usually framed as “effects” (living as the gender of one’s choice, feeling psychically content, having a fulfilling romantic life) are thus detached through these texts from their normative “causes” (medical intervention, psychic-somatic coherence, quantifiable conformity to binary gender expectations).

Clearly, these works extend beyond the single concept of puberty. But I have focused on it throughout, and return to it here, for two reasons: because of its rich indexing of multiple ideologies, and because its appearance in these texts indexes their own inclinations. *Blues*, *Visible Man*, *Heaven*, and *Cereus* do not use the concept of puberty for assimilative, explanatory, or otherwise “meaningful” purposes. They take it on in non-sensical and yet often matter-of-fact ways, constantly nudging it away from its assumed purposes rather than attempting to inhabit its original form. Consider, for example, the fact that *Cereus* – though of course a fictional narrative – makes no attempts to describe its characters’ gender transitions as “realistic” events, though other events (rape, mental illness, childhood bullying) are rendered in stark, sobering detail. *No Telephone to Heaven* is more realist in tone, yet it leaves vague and ambiguous many of the details of Harry/Harriet’s transitions. The non-fictional texts I have looked at also vacillate between reality and fantasy; when Jamison Green states that he “needed to go through a puberty to which [he] could relate,” for example, there is no explicit recognition of the fact that, by the definition that has long circulated, and continues to circulate, in contemporary culture, no one can actually experience more than one puberty, and that puberty is never contingent upon whether one “relates” to it. Thus, even in the attempt to make sense of a life that a memoir

constitutes, Green still technically does *not* make sense – just as *Cereus* and *Heaven* may leave the reader frustrated in their “unrealism.” But these texts may very well prompt the reader to, in turn, consider the arbitrary ways that “realism” is institutionalized: Harry/Harriet scoffs at the idea that being “Harriet” means he must not have a penis anymore – figuring as random, yet pervasive, the dominant connection that *does* exist between “Harry” and penis.

Stephen Whittle may be right to complain that there is an “ongoing paucity of empirical analysis of gender diversity” – as he states, “although there is a vast array of medical and cultural comment, there is little in terms of in-depth empirical scientific, sociological, and legal investigation” into transgenderism (xiv). But I argue that literary texts – even, and perhaps especially, those which are “unrealistic” or “magical-realist” – have an investigative role to play. Indeed, Whittle notes that for “trans people to challenge their exclusion from language ... [is to challenge their exclusion] from basic human rights” (xiii). But Mootoo and Cliff, and even “real-life” activists such as Stone, Stryker, Feinberg, and Green, suggest to varying degrees that obfuscation and difficulty, rather than realism or inclusiveness, form the most appropriate responses to such exclusion. These texts decline to wholly assimilate trans narratives to normative life narratives (if such a move would even be possible, much less permissible). They uncouple themselves from the common imperatives of classical narrativity – such as recognizable, idealized character “growth;” full narrative closure; temporal coherence and linearity – which also delimit what counts as a life. And they step outside of the very specific narratives of technological advancement; national progress; and human development – those narratives which have served the ends of colonial subjugation and transgender subordination alike. In the very mystification, or mysticism, of fictional transitions such as Tyler’s and Harriet’s organic changes, Green’s description of his second puberty, and even the

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innerworkings of non-trans psyches like Mala Ramchandin's, we confront the limitations of those narratives, and of ourselves as readers.

Notes

¹ Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (168).

² Susan Stryker gives a long view of this picture: "since at least the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, transgender phenomena have taunted the social order in ways that have spurred the development of sexology, psychiatry, endocrinology, and other medical-scientific fields involved in social regulatory practices. The clinical bibliography specifically related to transgender phenomena ... can be traced back to figures like Richard von Krafft-Ebbing ... By the middle of the last century, a specialized medical literature on 'gender dysphoria' coalesced around the work of Harry Benjamin ... which culminated in 1980 in the legitimation of a newly-defined clinical entity, 'gender identity disorder,' as an official psychopathology recognized by the American Psychiatric Association [that must be granted as a diagnosis before individuals can receive any kind of 'treatment' or surgery]" (14).

³ According to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), the term was coined in 1992 by Feinberg, who drew on Virginia Prince's term for crossdressers, "transgenderists."

⁴ In her 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article, "When Girls Will Be Boys," Alissa Quart reports that "few transmen [elect to have 'bottom surgery'], in part because the operation is thought to be too rudimentary and in part because many transmen view it as unnecessary" (37). As regards the first claim, there has been documented evidence that surgeons believe it easier to make a vagina than to make a penis – which accounts for the tendency to "sex" intersexed and genitally disfigured children as females. (See John Colapinto's case history of David Reimer in *As Nature Made Him*, and Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body*.) Multiple factors potentially explain the second claim. For one thing, FTM individuals often emerge out of feminist, queer, and activist communities in which gender norms are frequently questioned, leading them to view genital reconstruction as an irrelevant part of their transitions. Also, as Quart's article details, many of those individuals are partnered with like-minded women – and some of these relationships preceded gender transitioning. While this comparison is anecdotal, it is interesting to note that many published accounts of FTM transitions include the story of a (straight, female) partner leaving the individual in question (see, for example, Jenny Finney Boylan's memoirs), while many published accounts of MTF transitions include the story of a (queer/lesbian, female) partner *staying* (see, for example, Diane Anderson-Minshall's writings about her husband, Jacob).

⁵ According to Ariadne Kane's article on "Cross-Gendered Persons" in the *International Encyclopedia of Sexology*, "until the mid-1970s, many sexual and gender options were seen and diagnosed as deviations of the male/female gender dichotomy and/or as types of sexual dysfunction." However, the texts I treat here indicate that transgenderism, in many cases, has continued to be treated with gender-binary beliefs in mind. See also note 36.

⁶ Here, Halberstam is referring to the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, who put under scrutiny the concept of the individual, autonomous human subject. While their work has therefore been read as nihilist by some – as leaving no room for individual agency or radical counteraction – scholars such as Amy Allen have recently argued against this view. In her 2000 *Philosophical Forum* article, "The Anti-Subjective Hypothesis: Michel Foucault and the Death of the Subject," Allen argues that to say (as Foucault has throughout his work, particularly *The Order of Things* [1970]) that the individual is an effect of discourse and power is not to say that there is no outside to discourse or power.

⁷ As I discuss later in this chapter, while these kinds of "post-transsexual" stances seem quintessentially late capitalist – interested in appearances over "reality," in the (alleged) end of grand narratives, and in the dissolution of strict binary codes – they are deeply committed to capitalist critique.

⁸ That is, these texts shift our attention away from the technomedical narrative of progress in order to question it, not in order to invisibilize the labor that transgenderism (often) still involves.

⁹ Consider how the *OED*'s definition of puberty lacks any direct reference to agency or ideology: "[puberty is] the period of life during which a young person reaches sexual maturity and becomes capable of reproduction; the sequence of structural and functional changes that occur in the body during this period, including the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics (such as pubic, axillary, and (in the male) facial hair) and the onset of the secretion

of sex hormones and the production of ova or sperm.” I have already cited feminist views of gender transitioning as manipulation; the *OED* is much more generous in calling transgenderism “*the state or condition of being transgendered*” (my emphasis) but offers this next definition: “*behaviour in which a person’s identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender*” (my emphasis).

¹⁰ As Michael Apple states, referring to the work of Nancy Lesko, “our accepted ways of viewing adolescents were informed by the history of imperialism, masculinity, and racial dynamics” (Lesko xii). I argue that our ways of viewing adolescents, puberty, and the puberty-like transitions of transgendered people are *still* informed by such histories. And, more specifically, I argue that the works I consider seek to add capitalism and ecological domination to Apple’s list.

¹¹ In *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (2003), Eviatar Zerubavel notes that the “common association of time’s arrow with an upward direction (and its rather pronounced positive cultural associations) is quite crisply encapsulated in the title of Jacob Bronowski’s popular book and television series, *The Ascent of Man*, as well as in the conventional vision of the ‘lower’ forms of life occupying the lower rungs of the ‘evolutionary ladder.’” As he explains further, “as the brainchild of the Enlightenment, progressionism [as he calls it] is a hallmark of modernity and has certainly been a much more common historical outlook over the past two hundred years than during any earlier period” (15).

¹² *OED*.

¹³ See Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998), cited later in this chapter, and Eve K. Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay.”

¹⁴ In *Transgender Warriors* (1997), Leslie Feinberg introduces the terms “hir” for his/her and “ze” for he/she. I will use these neologisms to refer to those characters and figures who articulate their experience of life in both male and female terms, and for those whose preferred pronouns I do not know.

¹⁵ We must note that this passage, and Feinberg’s diction, are rather ambiguous. One might read this passage in at least three non-exclusive ways: as Jess wondering if she is brave enough to grow up to be *transgendered*; if she is brave enough to grow up to be butch; and/or if she is brave enough to live as a woman while knowing that she is transgendered “inside.” I read it as some combination of the latter two. But in any case, the point remains: the contingency of the word “if” militates against the kind of determinism so central to normative developmentalism.

¹⁶ This same account appears in Quart’s non-fiction piece in the *New York Times Magazine*. As she states, “when [interviewee] Rey entered puberty, he felt the loss of the ‘tomboy’ sobriquet acutely. ‘My body changed in freshman year of high school, and it made me depressed,’ Rey said” (34).

¹⁷ Of course, aging past the point of reproductivity often involves the deterioration of the body. But as I have noted in Chapter 1, the developmental narrative rarely considers old age; from the perspective of preadolescence, only the immediate post-adolescent period matters.

¹⁸ This queer experience of double-age, interestingly enough, is also accompanied by a greater willingness to explore sexual identities and experiences. Green describes how, as a newly-incarnated man, he experiments with sex with other men as well as with women – whom he had exclusively dated as a butch lesbian. Interestingly enough, the temporary safe harbor of butch lesbianism (which we might read as a kind of parallel to tomboyism) was not, as Green describes it, amenable to such women having sex with men – yet his new male status allows him both socially and psychically to explore sexual contact with men of many ages and races.

¹⁹ In *Queering the Color Line* (2000), Siobhan Somerville discusses the secondary character of Ed, Jess’s African-American trans friend. As she argues, “via her suicide, Ed is positioned in a conventionally tragic narrative, one that, by implication, racializes Jess’s own seemingly heroic attainment of masculinity. Jess’s guilt [when Ed dies], therefore, might be born of her implicit awareness that, in her own search for a stable, normative position of power, she has disaffiliated with Ed and her seemingly inevitable alienation from racially unmarked [read: white] categories

of masculine privilege” (174). Somerville neglects to mention that Jess is strongly identified as working class and Jewish, not exactly the type to completely blend in in dominant society. But her point about hir ability to *potentially* pass as white and male helps us better understand *Stone Butch Blues* as an anti-progressive narrative: like the other works I discuss, it does not allow one’s “other” identities to become peripheral to transgenderism, or, on the other hand, subordinate other issues to it.

²⁰ Here I mean materialism in three of the multiple meanings of the term: as the emphasis on material objects and material accumulation; as the belief that the greatest value lies in material progress; and as the idea that physical matter is the only measure of reality.

²¹ Schreber was a German judge who, in 1900, began writing his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, an account of his descent into schizophrenia that includes an elaborate theory of how God was punishing him.

²² See also *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).

²³ For example, her case study of Joan of Arc suggests that the peasant warrior’s persecution was inextricably intertwined with the Catholic Church’s misogynist – and, by extension, transphobic – war on older faith systems. As Feinberg claims, “the Church was waging war against peasants who resisted patriarchal theology and still held onto some of the old pre-Christian [i.e. pagan] religious beliefs and matrilineal traditions” (34); in this version of things, Joan of Arc was persecuted as the remnant of a population mainstreamed into a conservative sexual-religious regime.

²⁴ The editors of *The Transgender Theory Reader* note that “Feinberg’s particular theory of history has not attracted widespread support in transgender communities” (205).

²⁵ This queer ecocriticism operates along the same lines as ecofeminist thought, and would actually, I believe, be fairly categorized as ecofeminist. As Greta Gaard states, “Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1).

²⁶ See Issac Julien’s exploration of dancehall culture in the documentary *The Darker Side of Black* (1993). Timothy Chin’s article, “‘Bullers’ and ‘Battymen’: Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature,” also offers a critical examination of related controversies. In terms of literature, the politics of Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1984) have been widely debated. Marshall’s text, set in the West Indies, insists that (most) homosexuals are exemplary imperialists; the gay and lesbian masses she represents are materialist, abusive, self-centered, and racist – and even the individuated ones like Merle’s patron are similarly figured. While GLBT people can of course be all of those things and worse, the explicit connection drawn between sexual/gender deviance and the above behaviors is rather troublesome.

²⁷ As Ann Cvetkovich states, her “grandmother’s ruinate house ... becomes a symbol of resistance and reverse colonization” (150).

²⁸ Freud locates the castration complex in the earlier phallic stage, rather than the genital stage – that which coincides with adolescence and puberty. But I would argue that Harriet’s use of the term “castration” invokes the ways in which sexological discourses, and Freudian discourse in particular, loom over trans people’s attempts at self-determination.

²⁹ As I have already described how the trans person-as-caregiver/nurse functions in *No Telephone to Heaven*, I will limit this discussion with *Cereus Blooms at Night*. But suffice it to say that it is notable that these non-operative, “organic” trans people appear in medical settings.

³⁰ See page 46 of this chapter for commentary on *Cereus*’ page design and illustrations.

³¹ We could, of course, diagnose Mala as having dissociative identity disorder – and Mootoo may indeed intend such a reading. In fact, we might say that she presents us with two conditions, dissociative identity disorder and transgenderism, that specifically disrupt normative conceptions of time as linear, and that she portrays them sympathetically as coping mechanisms rather than as the extreme mental illnesses the medical establishment and larger society often believe them to be.

³² Val Speidel is credited with the book's design, while Mootoo herself contributed the cover art: a painting of two cereus blossoms.

³³ Readers may connect Mootoo's Lavinia to Titus Andronicus's sacrificial daughter of the same name, from the eponymous play by Shakespeare. *Titus's* Lavinia is raped, rendered mute, and turned into a tree – transfigurations that certainly echo the ecocritical, feminist, and transgender concerns of *Cereus*.

³⁴ See Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004). Her prior work has often come under fire for the aforementioned reasons, prompting her to devote large sections of this recent book to “livability” – the health, happiness, and safety of the average GLBT individual.

³⁵ In “The Empire Strikes Back,” Sandy Stone reports that, “besides the obvious complicity of [early, medical-focused accounts of transgenderism] in a Western white male definition of performative gender, ... authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification” (5) that is, not surprisingly, subtly homophobic. Ze describes Niels Hoyer's account of a male-to-female transsexual, Lili Elbe, in *Man Into Woman* (1933), writing that “Hoyer must separate the subjectivity of ‘Andreas,’ who has never felt anything for men, and ‘Lili,’ who, in the course of the narrative, wants to marry one ... The force of an imperative – a natural state toward which all things tend – to deny the potentialities of mixture, acts to preserve ‘pure’ gender identity: at the dawn of the Nazi-led love affair with purity, no ‘creatures’ will tempt Andreas into transgressing boundaries with his ‘own kind’” (7).

³⁶ Stryker argues that queer theory's focus on object choice as a determinant of one's social outsidership elides the specificity of transgendered experience and contributes to what ze calls “homonormativity.”

³⁷ Extremely rare conditions exist in which children never experience puberty – for example, Turner syndrome.

In recent months, the media has trained its attention on transgendered children who are being raised in their gender of choice by sympathetic parents – many of whom are greatly concerned about their children's impending puberty. In 2007, *20/20* aired a special on such families, spotlighting a handful of parents who are considering treating their children with hormones *before* puberty. Such considerations indirectly recognize the cultural centrality of puberty – and, we might say, draw attention to its sacred, *singular* position in the cultural imagination. But even attempting to obviate the need for a second puberty indicates how the trans body both thwarts the imperatives of linear time, and occasions strenuous efforts towards upholding linear time (or at least the *appearance* thereof).

³⁸ Depending on the description, puberty is either the set of somatic events that announces adolescence, or the somatic events that take place within the larger period of psychological and social change.

³⁹ See *Act Your Age! A Social Construction of Adolescence* (2002). Lesko's observations are actually quite similar to those of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000). For example, they argue that, in modern Western thought, beginning with nineteenth-century anthropology in particular, “the diachronic stages of humanity's evolution toward civilization were thus conceived as present synchronically in the various primitive peoples and cultures spread across the globe ... The reality of India and Indians [for example] was thus supplanted by a powerful representation that posed them as an other to Europe, a primitive stage in the teleology of civilization” (126).

⁴⁰ According to Kristen Kuehnle and Anne Sullivan's 2001 article, “Patterns of Anti-Gay Violence: An Analysis of Incident Characteristics and Victim Reporting” (published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 16), trans people are more likely than lesbians, gay men, or bisexual persons to experience violence that requires hospitalization or results in death. “Overkill,” which the *It's Time*, Illinois “Report on Discrimination and Hate Crimes Against Transgendered People in Illinois” says is “typical of hate-related murders of transgendered individuals,” is defined

by Jeffrey-John Nunziata as “1) four or more gunshots or stab wounds; 2) repeated use of blunt object(s); or 3) use of more than one method of murder, any one of which would have independently killed the victim, such as strangulation followed by multiple stabbings.”

⁴¹ As they continue, “among the academic disciplines involved in this cultural production of alterity, anthropology was perhaps the most important rubric ... from the real differences of non-European peoples, nineteenth-century anthropologists constructed an other being of a different nature; differential cultural and physical traits were constructed as the essence of the African, the Arab, the Aboriginal, and so forth” (125-6).

⁴² Mainstream GLBT discussions frequently include such comparisons. Consider, for example, *The Washington Blade*'s article, “Gene Robinson is Our Martin Luther King” (<http://www.washblade.com/2007/1-19/view/columns/monroe.cfm>).

Chapter 4:

Visibility and Toxicity: *Safe* and Unsafe Bodily Environments

To see is to draw a *limit* beyond which vision becomes barred. ... For it is not the closing of one's eyes that determines the invisible as its empirical result; it is rather the invisible (the repressed) that predetermines the closing of one's eyes. ... Paradoxically enough, however, it is precisely the imposition of a limit beyond which vision is prohibited which ... makes possible the illusion of total *mastery* over meaning as a whole, as an unimpaired *totality*.¹

– Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*

Figures 1-6: Todd Haynes's *Safe*

1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



Upon its release in 1995, Todd Haynes's *Safe* quickly became associated with both the boom in quality independent filmmaking – filmmaking that often flouted classical Hollywood conventions – and what B. Ruby Rich dubbed the “New Queer Cinema:” the “wave of queer films that gained critical acclaim on the festival circuit in the early 1990s” (Aaron 3). It received numerous critical plaudits, including the title of “best film of the decade” from the *Village Voice*. However, the film itself is self-consciously set in 1987, eight years before its actual release.² This retro status positions *Safe* amidst particular social debates that raged in the U.S. in the 1980s – around issues such as the income gap, the state of the nuclear family, and the advent of AIDS – while, at the same time, its intervention in these debates stretches out in both directions. That is, the film takes on both the ongoing replication of dominant social expectations, particularly around bodies, and the epistemologies that have informed, and continue to inform, those expectations – including the standards of classical narrative and visuality. In fact, as I will show, *Safe* is not merely non-canonical in terms of its independent, non-commercial, and queer-

identified status, or even its thematic interest in social mores; it is queer in how it mobilizes narrative and visuality for critical purposes. While in Chapters 2 and 3 I undertook largely formal and largely discursive investigations of literary texts, respectively, in this chapter I take a formal-discursive approach to a medium that I have thus far not considered as an arbiter of queer bodily change: I argue that *Safe* is an occasion for thinking about how bodies can be critically examined, and reimagined, through an adjustment of cinematic, specifically visual, terms.

Safe has a seemingly mundane premise:³ it tells the story of one well-to-do white nuclear family, housewife Carol White (Julianne Moore), her husband Greg (Xander Berkeley), and stepson Rory (Chauncey Leopardi), who live in Southern California's San Fernando Valley. Though notably passive and listless, Carol appears generally healthy at the film's start.⁴ But she becomes increasingly sensitive to everyday toxins – from automobile exhaust to cleaning products – and experiences nosebleeds, nausea, and seizures. Her husband is concerned about her illness, yet frustrated by its enigmatic character; though she seeks help from her male doctor and a male psychiatrist, no definitive explanation for her maladies is ever arrived at. In one scene, in response to Carol's claim that she has a chemical imbalance, her doctor definitively snaps, "It's just not showing up on the tests" – disdainfully suggesting her problems to be psychosomatic. Through such moments, Haynes makes clear that the regimes of visibility⁵ – those which underpin both classical film viewership and dominant social frameworks – play a central role in organizing Carol's world and our world as viewers, particularly when it comes to bodily transformations.

Safe shifts its environment from the suburbs to the desert mid-way through. Seeking both validation and alternative forms of treatment, Carol retreats to a healing center in New Mexico called Wrenwood, masterminded by a charismatic self-identified "chemically-sensitive person

with AIDS;”⁶ Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman). Although Wrenwood, where the film closes, appears at first to be a more empathetic environment than that of the hospital or psychiatrist’s office, the film indicates that all of these spaces are governed by similar impulses. As Haynes states in the 1999 Columbia Tristar DVD liner notes to the film,

New age thought is so big among AIDS and cancer patients ... because it creates a feeling of comprehension, a way to control the sense of meaninglessness that grips [their] lives. But within that control these doctrines of inner health assign to their sufferers ... ultimate responsibility ... [while] society gets off scott [sic] free. This is how new age thought ultimately works in favor of the system while claiming to transcend it.

Such moves not only indirectly blame the victim, but thwart collective action through their subtle, paternalistic privatizing of environmental and health concerns.

I juxtapose Carol’s doctor’s reaction to Haynes’s comment in order to tender the claim that the film’s queering of narrative and visual epistemology as regards bodies has a particularly ecocritical dimension. I make the case that, through *Safe*, we can see how dominant representations and understandings of environment and “nature” do not merely describe, but also construct, those spaces – and, moreover, that those representations and understandings are intimately connected to how we conceive of bodily change and pain. Specifically, I show how the film links the (in)visibilization of envirohealth concerns to dominant sexual and racial standards. Queer bodily transformations, per *Safe*, thus do not exist as such: they are instead contingent, based on the values and epistemologies through which we perceive the contexts in which bodies appear. Particular bodies are sutured into, and naturalized in relation to, their environments, producing some as “queer,” while invisibilizing or precluding such “queerness” in others – to potentially fatal effect.

This chapter is divided into two sections, one that mainly treats the environmentally ill protagonist Carol, and one that mainly treats *Safe*'s marginal characters. In the first section, I discuss the film's exposure of classical narrative logic as a force for imposing meaning on bodies, and the film's use of distancing and estranging visual techniques⁷ – in particular, the camera's frequent distance from Carol's body, and our concomitant distance from it as viewers. These moves, I argue, slacken the viewer's propensity to take Carol as a site of normative identification. In the second section, I explore what else happens when that propensity slackens, when we do not assume that Carol's is *the* story and *the* body to be read: we are freed, if ever so slightly, to consider those other figures/bodies such as Carol's maid and the hospital nurse – and, more pointedly, to consider *their* envirohealth risks. Even if we read this “slight”ness as Haynes's actual reluctance to consider such figures/bodies, two points remain: first, we have this opportunity nonetheless, and, second, we are moved in turn to consider just how circumscribed our “freedom” is. That is, the narrative and the camerawork ultimately keep us from seeing more if we wish to. *Safe*, in other words, cites narrative/visual norms only to make known their limitations, occlusions, and *self*-occlusions – how these norms hide themselves, and their means of transmission/reproduction, in plain sight.

Curiously, the film's engagement with environment/context, and with attendant concepts such as “nature,” has received relatively little attention, despite the fact that *Safe* focuses on the experience of environmental illness.⁸ In fact, perhaps because of the unresolved character of this illness, some critics see the film as failing to contribute meaningfully to ecocritical discourse.⁹ Laura Christian, for example, calls the television segment on deep ecology featured in one scene a “non sequitur interlude” (104). Most criticism has, instead, been focused on the viewer's relationship to the female protagonist, and/or on the film's relationship to queer politics. This

chapter seeks to deepen both discussions by positing *Safe* as a work centrally concerned with issues of environment, but one which extends and complicates ecocritical thinking on several fronts. First, the film interrogates the role of sexuality, and queer sexuality in particular, in relation to notions of environment. For example, heterosexuality becomes an environment, or context, in which bodies are usually read against queer ones as “safe.”¹⁰ The film also examines how the figurative terms “natural” and “unnatural,” so often applied to certain sexually or otherwise undesirable bodies, are not wholly separable from more literal understandings of “nature”-qua-environment. In these examinations, *Safe* remains attuned to race as something not “detachable” from sexuality. But race does not emerge as a concern only through the lens of sexuality; secondly, the film expands the concept of ghettoization put forth by work on so-called “environmental racism,” and stresses the importance of considering gender within such race-conscious paradigms. Finally, the film expands the definition of the term “environment” to include domestic/interior spaces – those spaces often believed to be constructed *in opposition to*, or *as refuge from*, “the environment.” Much like Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, *Safe* applies the concerns and insights of ecocriticism to ostensibly “unnatural” spaces, and the bodies they contain – in turn presenting us with a vision of how film might function uniquely as a queer form of ecocritical discourse.

I. *Safe Sex*: Queering Classical Narrative Logic, Queering the “Family Environment”

While Peter Dunning actually speaks the word “AIDS” about three-quarters of the way through the film, the syndrome obliquely enters the narrative fabric in a much earlier scene, wherein Carol and her friend Linda discuss Linda’s brother’s recent death. This scene is arresting in its economy: after Linda mentions her brother’s passing, Carol asks, “It wasn’t...?” Linda replies, “No. Everyone keeps ... not at all ... ’cause he wasn’t married.” Linda both refutes and

makes several logical leaps here – from her brother being unmarried, to him being gay, to him being HIV-positive, to him being an AIDS patient, to his death from AIDS. This narrative is almost unspeakable for Linda, but communicative nonetheless. The film illustrates for us here the generative workings of sexual epidemic discourse, and, more generally, contemporary sociopolitical expectations for the family. Focusing on AIDS, but also considering the rhetoric around “crises” ranging from divorce to teen pregnancy, Linda Singer argues that, “in [calling a phenomenon an epidemic], one not only engages in a kind of rhetorical inflation, but also mobilizes a certain apparatus and logic, a particular way of producing and organizing bodies politically” (27). Singer’s *Erotic Welfare* (1993) further characterizes these so-called epidemics as vehicles to which conservative politics hitches its agenda:

The anxiety that becomes mobilized around the connection of sex to death in AIDS entails an increased fetishization of life as such. Hence the anxiety produced through the epidemic is displaced and condensed in the regulation of sexual reproduction and the promotion of the family as the supposedly exclusive site of safe sex. (29)

In her clipped explanation to Carol, Linda intimates how AIDS becomes the occasion not for condemning risky sexual or narcotic behaviors, but for something more general: condemning non-heteronormative life. And this condemnation has effected the at least conceptual transformation of Linda’s brother’s body: judging from Carol’s questions and Linda’s response, his (dead) body is diseased within the social imagination – for the “everyone” Linda refers to. And even in rejecting these linkages, Linda reproduces them here for Carol and the viewer. It is not that “AIDS” points back to “unmarried,” but rather that “unmarried” points ahead to “AIDS.”¹¹ And considering that “AIDS,” in the cultural shorthand of 1987, meant “death,” the movement described above actually looks like a much simpler one: from “unmarried” to “dead.”

This hysteria is not just structurally similar to, but part and parcel of, the generative logic of epidemic on which Singer focuses. This notion of generativeness is, of course, inseparable from prevailing heterosexual standards. It is the other things that “unmarried” connotes in the scene – “childless,” “non-reproductive,” possibly even “sterile” – that leads to the (mis)diagnosis of queerness and AIDS – or queerness *as* AIDS. (That is, we can reasonably presume that the same suspicions would not have been generated if Linda’s brother were, say, a single father, not *just* unmarried.) Such a critique of single life thus necessarily bears with it a championing of heterosexual, reproductive marriage, and, less directly, the concepts of legacy and teleology. As Singer suggests above, the idealized nuclear family within sexual epidemic conditions is figured as insulating and literally conservative, capable in and of itself of warding off disease and intruders – while at the same time it valorizes, and delights in, reproduction that takes place within its patriarchal borders. Recent works in queer theory have criticized the anti-queer character of such pro-futurity and pro-reproductivity.¹² For example, in arguing that normative concepts of time are inextricably linked to normative institutions like marriage and the family, Judith Halberstam claims that “we pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 4). Here, “pathologize” does not necessarily have a medical implication. But *Safe* shows just how easily social censure dovetails with reigning imperatives of health. By his failure to show concern for legacy by marrying and reproducing, Linda’s brother becomes, at least in the public imagination, an infected and infectious body. Indeed, his life gets overwritten by the ever-generative capacities of gossip – a mode of discourse that is, ironically, more viral than his implied human immunodeficiency, and, arguably, more lethal, in that it achieves his social death.¹³ Linda’s halting, disjointed explanation, and Carol’s similarly disjointed questioning, thus represent the uphill battle of counter-discourse in the face

of such powerfully infectious suspicions.

In considering the ways in which reproductivity and futurity are linked, and in considering how Linda's brother's failure on both counts renders him socially dead, we can begin to see how what Peter Brooks calls "the dominant narrative tradition" (xii) has crucial implications for how we understand human life – and, I would add, for what is refused recognition *as* human life. As Brooks observes,

Our common sense of plot ... has been molded by the great nineteenth-century narrative tradition that, in history, philosophy, and a host of other fields as well as literature, conceived certain kinds of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of *sequence, in a temporal unfolding [heading towards an end]. In this golden age of narrative, authors and their public ... were engaged in a prime, irreducible act of understanding how human life acquires meaning.* (xi-xii, my emphasis)

While Brooks thereby locates classical or "dominant" narrative form in a particular historical moment, he also claims that it is both an ancient and ongoing obsession: not only is "the narrative impulse ... as old as our oldest literature," but "our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative" (3). Brooks draws on Freud, Lacan, and Benjamin to build a definition of narrative, but stops short of pointing out its inherently heteronormative and masculinist-erotic dimensions (though I am not as adamant as other theorists that this necessarily reflects Brooks's *own* biases¹⁴). As he writes,

Plot starts ... from that moment at which story, or 'life,' is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation, which demands narration ... [This] narrative desire [is] the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of

tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention.

(103)

At the same time, this forward-looking often points to an end, to death. And perhaps not incidentally, narrative as Brooks describes it above also has orgasmic connotations – and orgasm, of course, is widely known by its French moniker “*la petite morte*,” or “the little death.” But this death or end that the teleology of narrative implies is, Benjamin explains in his essay “The Storyteller,” what gives a life actual perimeters *as a life*, and the assurance that meaning can be drawn from this finite text. Returning to *Safe*, we see how the scene with Linda and Carol outlines the imperatives of classical narrative: clearly, the “right” kinds of human lives and human stories are forward-moving; “normal” human bodies produce tangible outcomes, and do so with foresight and self-control; human bodies inevitably plod towards death, but can do so happily in the knowledge that their offspring will carry their legacies forward – extending that individual life’s narrative both genealogically and symbolically.

Considering each of these imperatives in relation to the film illuminates how *Safe* queers classical narrative through its depiction of human bodies – and thereby exposes the workings of heterocentrism, androcentrism, and the widespread cultural logic that Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism” (3). Specifically, Carol – our apparently straight, white, well-to-do protagonist – fails to live up to any of these imperatives. Thus, not only do we see the ways in which these imperatives construct the bodies we see onscreen, but we actually lose Carol as a normative point of identification, one that can properly organize our viewerly impulses. *Safe* thereby suggests itself not as an endorsement of the dominant values it sometimes gestures at, but as a critical demystification thereof. To begin with: *The “right” kinds of human lives and human stories are forward-moving*. When we consider the film’s structure itself, it seems clear

that *Safe* undeniably unfolds in chronological order. However, many critics have discussed how Carol, as a character, frustrates temporal conventions by never fully triumphing over her health-related adversities, never reaching a level of enlightenment, and never achieving self-knowledge by the film's end.¹⁵ And we as viewers never receive a definitive explanation for Carol's disease; as Roddey Reid has pointed out, Haynes offers us only "partial knowledges," exacerbated by points of view that "can't be situated either from a position of omniscience or from a strictly subjective one" (41). As an *ostensibly* conventional film narrative, then, *Safe* feels rather limp. And rather than evincing a developmental arc like a conventional character *or* ideal person, Carol looks like an incidental flat line. When we agree to read *Safe* without strict adherence to normative expectations, these facts mark the film as a politicized shifting of generic standards rather than a simple failure to meet them; *Safe* queers narrative insofar as it refuses to make its ending coincide with any emotional or epistemological closure, and insofar as it refuses the demand (articulated at Wrenwood and elsewhere) that individual bodies grow, succeed, prosper, and develop in predictable, recognizable, socially-sanctioned ways.

I want to briefly push this idea of "limpness" even further by considering what work it does in a film that is not only frequently cited as part of New Queer Cinema,¹⁶ but which deals specifically with the nexus of racial, sexual, and class ideals. Monica Pearl contends that "New Queer Cinema *is* AIDS cinema: not only because the films ... emerge out of the time of and the preoccupations with AIDS, but because their narratives and also their formal discontinuities, are AIDS-related" (23). This narrative limpness – this avoidance of closure, this lack of interest in climax – can be clearly linked to AIDS. But it can also be seen as a larger effort toward queering (and not just "homosexualizing") accepted concepts of sex. AIDS spawned in gay male communities new ways and means of having sex that did not necessarily produce or involve

bodily fluids, thus troubling teleological (ejaculatory/interpersonal) definitions of sex.¹⁷ But non-teleological redefinitions of sex, *however they might come about*, deconstruct the androcentrism built into the very term “sex.” As historians of sex tell us, the male experience of sex has so deeply informed its definition that individuals once believed that women had to orgasm in order to become pregnant – just as men, generally speaking, have to have orgasms in order to impregnate.¹⁸ More recently, scholars such as Linda Williams have suggested that even if our contemporary culture is aware of the fact that “sex,” for women, does not equal “orgasm” (and, perhaps more disturbingly for some, that female sexual pleasure is not intimately linked to procreativity as it is for men), it does not necessarily *want to believe it*. *Hard Core*, Williams’s 1990 study of pornographic codes, describes how the so-called “money shot,” or scene of male ejaculation, is employed as both narrative closure and visual proof that sexual pleasure has been experienced. To refuse narrative closure, producing the limpness of a film such as *Safe*, is thus a particularly queer move: it troubles the logic that equates meaning with climax, and satisfaction with closure.

If we return to the basics of dominant narrative form here, we see just what is at stake in this limpness: if narrative is inextricable from such concepts as “tumescence,” and if, in turn, tumescence is a concept that emerges from the somatic, the limpness of *Safe* is a direct critique of the ways in which the heterosexual male body embodies the standard not just for the form of meaning, but for meaning itself. Murat Aydemir argues that, while in most imaginings (including Brooks’ definition of dominant narrative form), “ejaculation must serve as the climax that is able to put to rest the tension of narrative” – thus giving that narrative shape and, by extension, meaning – “representations of orgasm and ejaculation are often thick with the doubts and alternatives that their intense temporality brings up” (294). As an example, he cites the work of

Andres Serrano (best known for his *Piss Christ* [1989], which set off a firestorm around the National Endowment for the Arts and its funding standards); Serrano's *Blood and Semen* presents the two substances mixed together, sealed under glass, "acribi[ng] to sperm the temporality of a slow but inexorable process, of a quasi-eternal, celestial phenomenon" (294). In such depictions we find a rather queer refusal of male (re)productivity, of somatic efficiency, and of closure, in all its connotations. It is crucial, then, that before five minutes of *Safe* have even passed, Haynes has shown us a hetero-sex scene in which a man, Greg White, clearly reaches a climax while a woman, Carol White, on her back and facing up toward the camera, passively receives his thrusts: while this scene may seem normative in its mechanics, it thematizes the specifically masculinist-erotic dimensions of dominant narrative form and its imperatives, opening up space for refusing those imperatives. Indeed, Carol explicitly refuses his orgasm *qua* closure, lying awake and staring into space for some time before absent-mindedly patting her husband on the back.

This scene troubles two particular sets of equations: that of "sex" with "orgasm" and that of "orgasm" with "end" and, therefore, "meaning." These equations pervade heterosexual and some male homosexual definitions of sex, eliding the experience of many female, non-orgasmic, non-phallic, or otherwise "queer" bodies. And, if it were not already obvious, these equations inhere in conceptions of dominant narrative form. As Susan Winnett writes, "the meanings generated through the dynamic relations of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative ... never seem to accrue directly to the account of the woman" (515-6), or, I would add, to the other "aberrant" bodies mentioned above. This scene thereby serves as an early indication of what is at stake in *Safe*'s queering of narrative: an indictment of the universalized and yet exclusive experience of maleness and heterosexuality that informs its classic form – and,

thereby, narrows what “matters,” or what “means,” to very particular bodies. We must also note that this scene directly invokes particular regimes of visibility and representability – and not simply because it is part of a film. If, as Williams indicates, male pleasure is that which is both visible and deemed “representable,” then we cannot distinguish between what appears to be Carol’s lack of pleasure and the impossibility of representing her (potential) pleasure; in dominant narrative terms, it does not matter whether or not Carol orgasms, as only evidentiary male pleasure points toward closure, ending, meaning.

When we link this sex scene to other scenes, such as the one in which Carol’s doctor claims that he sees nothing on her tests, the ramifications of the regimes of visibility become apparent; it is not just that patriarchal males within the film operate through these regimes, but that women and various Othered bodies are detrimentally held to their standards. (*If I can’t see it, it must not matter, or must not exist.*) But even when this scene is not linked to others, it stands as a curious moment: to place a scene of male orgasm within the first five minutes of a film that ultimately provides no closure and which has little to no dramatic arc is to decouple that somatic act from its usual status as definitive, ultimate, and meaningful.

Finally, through this scene, Haynes also troubles the equation of “ejaculation” with “conception” in both senses of the latter term – the creation of a fetus, and the creation of an idea or ideology. Carol’s husband’s ejaculation does not actually “mean” anything insofar as it neither provides closure (again, we cannot forget how early in the film it is, making it literally anti-climactic), nor produces a child. This latter point is perhaps obvious, but we must consider that Haynes presents, but then always turns away from, the possibility that Carol could have been impregnated by her husband: not only is she rendered anti-maternal in several instances, but her subsequent sickness – which becomes obvious immediately following this scene – is never

suspected by any of the characters, including herself, to be related to pregnancy.¹⁹ Of course, heterosexual sex does not necessarily lead to pregnancy. But two points are crucial. First, this depiction of non-procreative heterosexual sex takes place within a film that, as I have noted here, critiques the heteronormativity and phallogentrism of classical narrative form. That is, we might read this sexual encounter as a miniaturization of the narrative norms that the film goes on to critique in various formal and thematic ways. Second, one of the ways that dominant cultural thought has managed the potential crises and failures of male orgasm is to imagine its solidification in terms of procreation. Aydemir writes of semen's "oscillation between metaphoricity and literalness ... idealization and materialization" (xxi), an oscillation that threatens to unsettle semen's status within "'conceptive' logic, in which the substance inevitability becomes generative and inseminating, and, hence, masculine, heterosexual, and procreative" (xx). Thus, the "conceptualization of sperm's generative import requires that the substance cannot be perceived in its concrete materiality, [and instead as] invisibly setting matter into formation within the female body" (xxi). Even if reproductivity per se were not a concern, Aydemir points out that "semen may form the formless substance that both lowers and de-hierarchizes the phallus/penis. Thus both the abject and the formless suggest ways in which ... sperm can be understood 'contraceptively': granting a solid, secure shape neither to its material effect, nor to the male body that produces it" (xxii). In refusing to rescue sperm from its shapelessness, aimlessness, and instability by reinscribing its meaning in generativity, *Safe* cites itself as invested in what Kaja Silverman calls "identifications [that] are perverse with respect ... to a phallic standard." As she explains, "these masculinities represent a tacit challenge not only to conventional male subjectivity, but to the whole of our 'world'" (1). As the norms of narrative govern both how we understand that world, and how we understand the texts within it, *Safe*

thereby estranges us not only from dominant film structures, but also from the misogynist and androcentric understandings of bodies, and the relations between bodies, that inform such structures.

Another one of our narrative/somatic imperatives is that “*Normal*” *human bodies produce tangible outcomes, and do so with foresight and self-control*. Carol, not being “self-actualized,” never achieves any level of self-control, and in fact is frequently found involuntarily “abjecting” rather than “producing.” Laura Christian describes how Carol’s frequent convulsions are accompanied by vomiting, crying, and bleeding, figuring her as a perpetual infant caught in a never-ending cycle of abjection.²⁰ Not surprisingly, then, Carol violates yet another narratological hetero-convention: *Human bodies inevitably plod towards death, but can do so happily in the knowledge that their offspring will carry their legacies forward*. Carol, the perpetual infant, is notably not the biological mother of her husband’s son Rory. While economic and social concerns around inheritance have historically been the province of men, Carol’s failure to parent a biological child has implications for the concept of legacy nonetheless. In “failing” to meet dominant patriarchal standards by not reproducing for her husband, and by not “relat[ing] ‘properly’ to heterosexuality” (Davis 192) by evincing or even performing pleasure in it, she thus casts into doubt her success as both a woman and a heterosexual.²¹ As Monique Wittig has suggested, these two categories are inseparable and mutually constitutive, a concept codified in her well-known pronouncement that “lesbians are not women.” Wittig’s 1982 collection *The Straight Mind* claims that “lesbian is the only concept ... beyond the categories of sex ... because the designated subject ... is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man” (20). Insofar as Carol “fails” as a reproductive woman, she is undeniably queer/ed in the sense Wittig suggests:

unable to fulfill the tenets of heterosexuality that would make her “female,” and the tenets of femininity that would make her “heterosexual” – as well as the narratological/developmental tenets that would designate her as both. Moreover, we might note, drawing on Aydemir’s work, that Carol also fails to uphold heterosexuality as a system insofar as her body fails to signify her *husband’s* body as meaningful and productive; she queers him as well, insofar as she does not “gran[t] a solid, secure shape to ... [semen’s] material effect ... [or] to the male body that produces it.”

Once again, we see how bodies are deemed queer (or not queer) based not on some *a priori* status, but rather on the contexts and spaces in which they are couched (or fail to be couched). And perhaps more importantly for our reading of the film, we begin to doubt the normative ways in which we might read the bodies visible to us, such as Carol. Indeed, if we reflect on the discursive fate of Linda’s brother, we see that one’s ostensive heterosexuality is often not read as such unless framed within the particular environs of the reproductive marriage. Heterosexuality, then, is less a state or even an identity than a contingent presumption. It is environmental by the most basic definition of the term: contextual. And by failing heterosexuality, Carol fails to be a proper narrative subject in the ways I have suggested – specifically, she does not serve the masculinist, heteronormative imperative of “tumescence” that leads to a dramatic exposition and conclusion. Perhaps, then, it is not simply the flatness of *Safe’s* trajectory, but the flatness of its protagonist that so frustrates the average viewer and so defies the heteronormative dimensions of storytelling. Not only does Carol not learn or “grow” or “improve” – her bodily reactions portend physical and emotional deterioration rather than physical or emotional development – her body does not produce anything socially desirable such as a child. Of course, on some levels Carol’s body is “productive,” but it is simply her own waste

that she expels – blood, vomit, tears. In short, she offers us little to no “payoff” for our viewing. Interestingly, the privatization that I scrutinize in greater depth in relation to Wrenwood sets up a curious scenario: if we accept the suggestion, advanced by Peter Dunning, that Carol is simply making herself sick, Carol’s body begins to look like a generative system of its own, capable of cycles of perpetuation that do not directly require other bodies or offer others pleasure, thus removing her further from the normative social and sexual economy.

AIDS as (Non-)Metaphor

There are several ways in which we might interpret Carol’s bodily changes. Susan Potter maintains that “*Safe* allows AIDS to be easily substituted for Carol’s unidentified illness” (147), meaning that we might read her ailment as a metaphor for or analogue to AIDS. However, Potter believes that such an analogized reading “makes it difficult to account for the specific references to people with AIDS” within the narrative (147). In contrast, I argue that reading Carol’s illness as AIDS need not constitute a substitution at all. In fact, to read Carol as a body with AIDS, as I propose we do, elucidates many of *Safe*’s narratological and cinematic moves. First, and most concretely, Carol’s diagnosis of “environmental illness” is nebulous, and does not preclude other maladies. We might remember that Peter Dunning identifies himself as a “chemically sensitive person with AIDS;” this self-description makes perfect sense, considering that AIDS lowers one’s tolerance for toxins and infections. All we really know about Carol, technically, is that she is likewise “chemically sensitive;” the *cause* of this sensitivity is never identified. Second, I argue that to read Carol as a person with AIDS does not make it difficult at all to account for diegetic references to people with AIDS. It simply requires an awareness of the regimes of visibility and narrative, and the logic of epidemic that I have outlined. For one thing, the nature of the gossip about Linda’s brother shows us that those ensconced in environments believed to

be preventative and insular – the nuclear family, essentially – believe themselves, and their peers, to be immune to such health disasters as HIV infection. Moreover, such persons are usually rendered immune from suspicion in the first place. But Haynes figures Carol as a non-reproductive woman and a non-“natural” mother, one who fails to ratify normative narrative structures – and he thus denaturalizes the joining of particular categories (“woman,” here, is decoupled from “mother,” just as “AIDS” might be decoupled from “gay man”), availing Carol to other critical considerations such as this possibility of AIDS. Through Carol, then, *Safe* forces us to question the automatic contrasts assumed between “obviously” risky bodies and bodies found in conventional social arrangements and spaces, and to understand how the binaries of stigma vs. acceptance, quarantining vs. closeness, and normalcy vs. aberrance shore up those contrasts.

Those assumed contrasts may explain why Carol’s illness is never investigated to her (or, perhaps, our) satisfaction. As previously stated, when Carol claims that she has a chemical imbalance, her doctor snaps, “It’s just not showing up on the tests.” We might wonder what other tests, literal and figurative, Carol might *not* have taken, due to her presumed ability to pass them. For example, as a white, married, affluent, suburban woman, she simply does not occupy any of the AIDS risk categories as understood in 1987; thus, we can assume that, of all the possible maladies her doctor has been considering in relation to her, AIDS is not one of them – and that, of all the possible tests administered to her, an HIV test is not one of them.²² The regime of visibility becomes complex here: as Carol does not socially or physically appear to be someone who could have AIDS, neither Carol, her doctor, her husband, nor anyone else within the narrative is willing or able to see anything that might contradict that conclusion. Roddey Reid has produced an in-depth analysis of Haynes’s distancing and estranging camerawork (namely,

long, wide-angle shots and a virtual lack of close-ups), concluding that Carol's experience of illness is akin to our experience of viewing the film – "she no more understands herself, her illness, and her world than we do" (38). This ironic highlighting of vision's failure to offer knowledge²³ allows the film to critique the "populist epistemology of visibility [that] join[s] up with expert vision[,] wherein to see is literally to know" (Reid 34). In terms of *Safe*'s critical logic, seeing is certainly *not* knowing. And if Monica Pearl is right that New Queer Cinema is always in some sense about AIDS, then this insight must be extended to cultural discourse on the syndrome. Whether or not Haynes actually wants us to believe that Carol has AIDS – which, again, would certainly explain her sudden immunodeficiencies – is actually irrelevant here; but that certainly does not render AIDS a mere *reference point*, or the film a mere "queer allegory" (Potter 148). What we come to understand, in any case, is that, within the conservative logic contemporaneous to the film's milieu, Carol simply will never be read as someone with AIDS. Because her doctor, husband, and psychiatrist – along with some viewers, and several critics – cannot see her white female body as AIDS-prone, and because they *do* believe that seeing is indeed knowing, the possibility of such a diagnosis is never given credence, perhaps to Carol's detriment, and certainly to the detriment of more sophisticated medicocultural knowledge about AIDS.

Taking up my proposition – that we read Carol as "unsafe," specifically in terms of AIDS – begs the question of how she became ill in the first place. Several critics have proposed, though with reservations, Carol's husband as an explanation for her illness. However, most stop short of actually suggesting that he has transmitted HIV/AIDS to her. As Glyn Davis writes of one particular scene, "Greg's arm around Carol, in a film which focuses on bodily revolt, feels oppressive, restrictive, claustrophobic; it is thus tempting to speculate that Carol's condition is a

reaction against compulsory heterosexuality” (184). Potter writes that “love or expressions of love literally produce symptoms of ill health” within the film (147) – though there are actually several scenes, most notably Carol’s first attack, in which forces other than her physical contact precipitate illness. But to consider that her ill health is not indirectly caused by compulsory heterosexuality or “love,” but directly by AIDS – and to thereby suggest that her husband, with whom she has sexual contact within the film’s first five minutes, carries a notorious virus – forces us to examine the conservative regimes ordering Carol’s world. Such examinations dovetail with Linda Singer’s attack on the sociopolitical fantasy that women, and, for that matter, men, are safe (from disease, assault, discontent, and so forth) within the structures of the heterosexual family. Moreover, the reading I propose does more than reconfigure the bourgeois family as the site of female oppression (as I describe later in this chapter, such uncritical feminist responses are painfully ignorant of racial and class privileges): it asks us to totally reconceptualize what the face of AIDS looks like, and what “risky” environments look like. In doing so, we see the contingency inherent in reading bodily transformations: Carol’s reactions, and a specific diagnosis like AIDS, are “queer” from a dominant perspective insofar as they are not ideal or expected by her social status. But if we are skeptical about the conclusions that normative epistemologies produce for us, Carol’s reactions and an AIDS diagnosis appear less inconceivable; “queer” not in the latter sense, then, but insofar as they skeptically dismantle those normative epistemologies.

Critics such as Laura Christian, Danielle Bouchard, and Jigna Desai have commented on how *Safe* draws on the conventions of the horror film (see note 54), thereby producing a generic clash with the elements of domestic melodrama that the film also features. This clash, I argue, is not only indicative of but central to the kind of misfittings *Safe* enacts – such that we begin to

doubt the commensurability of (apparently) safe environments with safe bodies. We might take as an example the fact that we do not clearly see Carol's husband's face for the first 22 minutes of the film. This setup potentially provokes the viewer to ask if there's something "wrong" with this person, and to also assign a palpable strangeness, or estrangement, to the couple's relationship. Carol's husband, in these few minutes, becomes potentially monstrous – not, I would say, in order to demonize heterosexuality or straight masculinity per se, but rather to point to the estrangements that arise precisely from the assumption that we *do* know things, that we *can* acquire knowledge through vision, that things *are* what they appear to be. (Indeed, he orgasms when we have yet to see his face – further unsettling the notion that material proof, and the [male] body in general, are the ideal routes to truth and meaning.) That is, the film makes the body best-known and (theoretically) closest to Carol a site of uncertainty and even anxiety for the viewer and, as that viewer might momentarily assume, for Carol. Yet whatever suspicions we might have are never borne out. Greg's face is eventually shown to be normal, human, and healthy-looking, and his behavior is in no way monstrous – making *the film itself* appear to be unreliable, uncertain, and anxiety-producing in its very "failures" to follow through.²⁴ And to figure all this in sexual terms is to stage another questioning of the regime of visibility (a questioning that, not coincidentally, undermines the very authority that normative filmmaking seeks to establish): we not only think we can determine which spaces are safe just by looking at them, we think we can determine which *bodies* are safe by the same means. Such logic, of course, has proven deadly to many, in more ways than one.

Pathos and Cinematic Vision

Haynes's distancing techniques further court a reading of Carol as potentially having AIDS. These techniques, while questioning generally the visual's role in epistemology,

simultaneously cite phobic, discriminatory understandings of the syndrome. As is well documented, early reports on the syndrome branded it highly communicable; early sufferers were shunned and quarantined because of ignorance (whether willful or not) about the nature of their infectiousness.²⁵ And AIDS has long been associated – and was, particularly, in 1987 – with both queer and non-white bodies: Paula Treichler has described the concept of the “classic 4-H ‘risk groups’ – Homosexuals, Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, and Haitians” (as quoted in Balsamo 38). In *Safe*, then, the camera’s failure to get close to Carol’s body, and our distance from it as viewers (see figure 5), has at least two effects: invoking such fears of communicability, and queering/racially Othering the body we see onscreen.²⁶ When the camera *does* move in closer to Carol, its pace is so glacial as to be almost unnoticeable, figuring a deep trepidation. But this pace and this trepidation are, nonetheless, pathos-inducing. As Mary Ann Doane states, “pathos, the central emotion of melodrama, is reinforced by the disproportion between the weakness of the victim and the seriousness of the danger ... pathos closely allies itself with the delineation of a lack of social power and effectivity” (4-5). In distancing us from Carol’s besieged body, the film not only establishes that body as sick and Othered, and pathetic on *those* counts, it actually enacts some of the very structural inequities that constitute a pathetic state, such as lack of access to the media, lack of tools for self-representation and articulation, and lack of attention from the general public. And, not surprisingly, these lacks are staged in visual terms for us as viewers: as Carol’s observers, we cannot (or will not?) get very close to her, and we cannot (or will not?) look at her for very long. The cinematic distance and the visual deprivation staged here cannot but invoke the U.S. government’s blindness to the issue in 1987, the year in which the film is set, and the paltry access to mainstream media granted to persons with AIDS at that time.

Haynes's distancing also invokes the similarly pathetic state of affairs in which women are often ignored in health research and treatment, either for overtly sexist reasons, or because of the "benevolent" discrimination that fails to see their bodies of being in need of medical intervention or sexual regulation. For example, as Singer explains, "male hegemony has ... functioned to structure the anxiety formation dominating the AIDS discourse as a crisis in phallocentrism. ... [By extension,] women's position can be overlooked or minimized by a prudential logic of relative risk" (84). Interestingly, then, phallocentrism organizes not just the dominant narrative form to which Brooks et al. refer, but also specific narratives of disease and illness that circulate in our culture. The failure (or reluctance) of both diegetic characters and extratextual critics to consider that Carol might have AIDS thus looks like "flattering" hegemonic ignorance – "White Equals Clean!" "Heterosexuality is Safe!" and so forth – that stands in contrast to Haynes's own work. To be clear, I do not mean that Haynes treats Carol discriminatorily, per se, but that he treats her in ways that healthy, white, heterosexual bodies are almost never treated – in turn, both showing the unevenness of dominant vision, and putting under suspicion its use for us as viewers in looking at this protagonist. *Safe* prompts us to scrutinize what we normally believe, and how we normally see – a prompting that, as I discuss in greater depth later, can make us think differently of the marginal bodies that just barely show up onscreen.

The failure (or reluctance) to consider that Carol might have AIDS also demonstrates how androcentrism makes envirohealth victims of women like Carol.²⁷ Phallocentrism – or, at least, androcentrism – has been demonstrated to play a role in other envirohealth disasters. Susan Buckingham-Hatfield draws on Lois Gibb's whistleblowing work on Love Canal – recognized by ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell as a crucial moment in the "feminizing" of environmental

awareness – to illustrate the disastrous ramifications of relying on supposedly “neutral” health data. As she states, “inadequate guidelines on the effects of chemical pollutants were given for women and children[,] as the only available estimates were based on the assumption of workplace exposure of forty hours a week on men, who have a heavier body weight” (56).

Together, these examples suggest that “gender-neutral” envirohealth analyses more often than not privilege male bodies. And they also speak to a deeper problem: the supposedly safe bodies of certain women (and children) are imaginatively sutured into the supposedly safe spaces they occupy, such that any break in that fabric, any experience of bodily abnormality, simply cannot be articulated. The only “natural” place for the idealized body is safe space, and the only “natural” occupant of a safe space is an idealized body. If Carol occupies believed-to-be safe spaces, then she cannot have anything wrong with her. Through its queer techniques, *Safe* ironizes this prevailing ideology of naturalization, that which constitutes a near-total, often fatal, system.

Toward a Filmic Ecocriticism

Though they may not seem obviously concerned with issues of ecology or environmental activism, the film’s interrogations of vision and visibility are ecocritical in a crucial sense. They expose how dominant social mores lead us to construct certain spaces as safe and ideal (“the home,” the structure of the nuclear heterosexual-based white family), and others as unsafe and pathological (Africa, gay ghettos, the structure of single and/or non-reproductive life).

Understandings of and representations of spaces, *Safe* suggests, are always ideologically inflected, even as we may be convinced that these understandings and representations grow out of the spaces themselves. The film likewise insists that the body itself be considered as a constructed environment; as Carolyn Merchant has observed, in the “‘primary environment’ [of

the body] we are affected by the secondary environment depending on our maleness or femaleness” (as quoted in Buckingham-Hatfield 46) – and, as my argument indicates, depending on our raced, classed, and gendered sexuality. Informing such considerations of spaces and bodies is the insight that neat binary constructions – such as “inside” vs. “outside,” “safe” vs. “dangerous” – disable us in their insufficiency. Haynes’s (wry?) comment in *Safe*’s liner notes that the film is set “about as far outside the [visible, urban and/or lower-class] ‘war zone’ as I could imagine” suggests that we know what war zones look like, and that we know what enemy bodies look like. But, clearly, we do not. Or, at least, we have been wrong before, as the transformations of Carol’s body proves, and as the straight, white, rich, and female victims of AIDS have proved. *Safe* queers ecocritical thought by illuminating how what we believe to be “natural,” when it comes to bodies in particular, is the product of deep ideological investments in normative concepts, not just “pure” biological or even sociological understandings.²⁸ Normative concepts such as heterosexuality and reproductivity are, in fact, precisely by their status as “natural” – and through the linking of human heterosexual reproduction to the so-called “circle of life” found *in* nature – made impervious to questioning.²⁹ *Safe* thus offers a glimpse at how more literal ideas of “the natural” (e.g. organic and ecological) are highly intertwined with figurative ones (e.g. the ideal and the normative).

Beyond the conceptual work that the film does, *Safe* also queers film semiotics in particularly ecocritical terms. Many have suggested that this text is, fundamentally, *about* space.³⁰ But more than simply discussing or drawing attention to space, it produces meaning *through* space – that is, through the camera’s movements through spaces, and its registering of depth and margins. I have argued that the film’s questioning of visibility is all the more important for its staging through a visual medium.³¹ Likewise, in *Safe* we relentlessly ponder

structures through our access (or lack thereof) to them, and we relentlessly ponder movement through our ability (or lack thereof) to be mobile. Indeed, the film's favoring of long shots and tracking shots dares us to look around rather than training us directly on certain faces or objects. It is not surprising, then, that Reid claims *Safe* "practices an 'environmental' cinema of sorts in which not all toxins are industrial and biological; there are discursive and pedagogical ones as well" (34). Toxicity and pollution, however, are always problems of discursivity and pedagogy, never simple facts. Our understandings of environments, by the same token, are never *not* informed by particular ideologies, ideologies that dictate how we understand particular phenomena within those environments – that it is "right" that certain bodies are out of view, for example, or that it is "strange" that others are not in closer view. Mary Douglas provocatively argues against such declarations in 1980's *Purity and Danger*, writing, "there is no such thing as dirt: no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification" – or, I would say, environment – "in which it does not fit" (xvii). Douglas Crimp's claims in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (1988) bear striking resemblance to Douglas's: drawing on Françoise Delaporte's notion that disease, like dirt, does not exist *as such*, Crimp states that "AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it" (3). In light of these claims, *Safe* is indeed environmental cinema, a queer environmental cinema: it draws attention to the ways in which conceptions of "nature" and environment do not simply reflect those spaces, but actively participate in making them. And those acts, as we have already seen with both Carol and Linda's brother, have direct implications for how we recognize, and evaluate, instances of bodily change and pain.

II. "Safe Bodies Need Safe Environments": Environmental Racism and Ecocritical Resistance

Thus far, I have commented on the ways in which Haynes's film denaturalizes the folding of certain bodies into certain environments, and comments on the tools through which we see, and fail to see, certain bodily transformations. In so doing, as I have described, it militates against the idea that Carol's is *the* body to be read, and also queers/racially Others her. I argue that this work allows the viewer to focus on even more marginal bodies included in the film: the non-privileged serviceworkers, most of whom are people of color. First, even if we *do* still insist that Carol, as the protagonist, is more important than any other figure we encounter, it is difficult to argue that she is *most* important, considering that she does not stand in complete contrast to those strange and racially-marked Others on the film's margins. That is, even if we still choose to focus on her, the fact remains that the differentiation we might otherwise be able to make as classical film viewers, between protagonist and marginal characters, is fundamentally compromised here. Second, the film's distancing and estranging visual techniques allow or even encourage the viewer to scan a wider field, one in which the existence, *but also the frequent absence*, of marginal figures is occasionally perceptible. In turn, as I will show, these figures extend that critical project of probing how dominant narrative form and visual epistemology construct "safe" and "unsafe" bodily environments.

This section labors against at least two specific tendencies in scholarship on the film: first, to read race and class in *Safe* only through upper-class whiteness (i.e. Carol), and, second, to produce readings of the film that, in their privileging of gender over race and class, reproduce the blind spots and even the imperialism of Second Wave feminist rhetoric.³² These readings, as I will explain, narrowly conceive of the so-called "women's sphere," and thus threaten to maintain white women of privilege as the only bodies recognizable under the sign of "women." (These accounts also tend to use the term "white" without qualification, suggesting that Carol's

experience is no different than that of poor whites; as I discuss, the film includes a handful of lower-status white workers.) Such scholarly accounts recreate the very same tendencies of vision that Haynes's film prompts us to be suspicious of: after all, it is only when we loosen our tight grip on Carol's body that we are able to see the bodies that might expand our notions of "women" and the "women's sphere." Importantly, then, *Safe* makes these moves in particularly visual (and visible), and not exclusively narrative, terms: as dominant ways of viewing coincide with, and even mutually reinforce, dominant social structures, it is only our willingness to work against normal viewing practices that allows us, at least in part, to see what the sociopolitical structures cited in the film work to obscure.

Paul Farmer's 2003 book, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, extends Johan Galtung's definition of structural violence: Farmer argues, "rights violations are ... not random in distribution or effect ... [they are], rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm" (xiii). We might consider environmental racism as one example of structural violence. Coined in the 1980s by social justice advocates, the term "environmental racism" emerged out of the understanding that, as Robert D. Bullard explains, "people of color are subjected to a disproportionately large number of health and environmental risks in their neighborhoods ... and on their jobs" (10). This section claims that *Safe* directly engages with the discourses of structural violence and environmental racism, and, in so doing, broadens their analyses. *Safe* shows us that environmental racism (and classism) manage to operate within certain realms of privilege, and are not relegated to ghettoized communities alone. That is, in focusing on the imperialist complexes found at the interstices of public and private spaces, it suggests that the spheres of privilege and

disenfranchisement overlap in more intimate ways than Bullard or Farmer might imagine.³³ Even further, we can say that the film characterizes the health risks specific to service work in upper-class contexts as particularly insidious, in that these risks are less obvious, less visible, and thus seem less pressing, than those associated with, say, manufacturing or manual labor. And it sketches out the ways that certain labor conditions are figured as “natural,” or inevitable, for certain bodies – and, conversely, the ways in which certain bodies are figured as tough and resilient and thus a perfect “match” for their work contexts. Such figurations at once obfuscate and justify the very operations of environmental racism.

A brief list will help indicate the preponderance of literally marginalized persons in *Safe*: the movers of various races who transport Carol’s new couch to her home; the white customer service representative who fields her complaints about the couch being the wrong color; her Latina maid Fulvia (Martha Velez-Johnson);³⁴ her Latina caterers; her friend’s Latina maids; the Latino workers who paint her cabinets; her Asian-American dry cleaner; the African-American medical assistant who comforts her during her allergy test; the nurse of indeterminate race in her hospital room³⁵; the white woman who perms her hair and paints her nails; and the white cabdriver who drives her to the Wrenwood retreat in New Mexico. The majority of criticism on the film routinely elides these figures, preferring to follow dominant ways of reading by making Carol, the body who appears onscreen most often and in closest view (relatively speaking), the subject of attention and analysis – even when, as Potter notes, many of Haynes’s techniques “withhold the identification with character that ... classical techniques conventionally secure” (126). Such figures are not unexpected within a film that depicts upper-class life, of course; one might argue that they function merely to establish the film’s setting, and, therefore, should be considered merely part of the *mise-en-scène*. But, as I will describe, these bodies almost always

appear in the margins and backgrounds of the film's scenes, even, or especially, when they are not central to the ostensible narrative – a fact that we are better enabled to notice due to the film's favoring of long shots and tracking shots over close-ups. These marginal bodies thereby call into question the hegemonic regimes of visibility that I have discussed above, and, concomitantly, indict our willingness to read Carol's story as the only story of the film.

In many of the critical accounts that ignore these marginal bodies, the question of sympathy turns primarily on Carol's existence under supposedly repressive conditions. For example, in her article on pathos in Haynes's films, Mary Ann Doane calls Carol "a hostage of her environment" (6). I do not want to suggest that the film *never* courts the kind of feminist reading that would position Carol as a victim of repression, for *Safe* does hold out possibilities for a liberal-feminist critique uncritically sympathetic to Carol. (And, as I have shown, gendered assumptions contribute to the blessing *and* the curse of being assumed "safe.") First, when Carol sits down with her doctor to talk about further treatment, her husband accompanies her; and when the doctor suggests she visit a psychiatrist, he hands the card to her husband, rather than to her.³⁶ A less obvious example arises when Carol is asked to describe a room she remembers from her past to her female group therapy partner. Carol communicates in the halting cadence we've heard her use several times throughout the film: she rarely finishes sentences, she parrots the psychobabble she's latched on to, she trails off. In fact, the only sentence she manages to get out in this scene is "it [the room] had yellow wallpaper." While we could read this comment as Haynes's simple invocation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1899 novella, *The Yellow Wall-paper* – a classic text depicting upper-class white feminist concerns – and, thus, as the filmmaker's unambiguous compassion for the upper-class white female figure,³⁷ we can also imagine Carol herself accessing this reference – a possibility that would reflect more critically on her position.

The Yellow Wall-paper tells the story of a young mother suffering from some ambiguous malaise – postpartum depression, contemporary readers sometimes guess, though Gilman herself was diagnosed with the more general “hysteria,” a degrading experience that prompted her to write *Wall-paper*³⁸ – whose condescending husband brings her to a country home and confines her within one of the rooms for “rest.” As the woman slowly goes mad from her patronizing treatment, she strips the room of its yellow wallpaper. If we take seriously Carol’s allusion to Gilman’s novella, we come away with what actually looks like a relatively calculated discursive plan: asking for freedom from the confines of the “women’s sphere,” asking that her symptoms be recognized and validated by the paternalistic forces of her husband and the male medical establishment, and, more pointedly, asking that her symptoms be recognized as significant based on upper-class knowledge or cultural precedent – after all, college-educated women would undoubtedly know Gilman’s work. Inherent in, and even constitutive of, such a request for recognition (not to mention the values of *Wall-paper*’s protagonist herself) is a failure to examine racial and class privilege. As Bouchard and Desai write, “liberal feminist discourse about control and agency [is] deeply implicated in imperial claims about white normative subjectivity” (370). If Carol is indeed harnessing this discourse, then, she does so with a lack of interest in examining how her social place largely avails her of the possibilities of medical and marital attention, and how her “women’s sphere” is actually a place of relative privilege, open only to certain kinds of women. I would argue, in fact, that it is not insignificant that the *Yellow Wall-paper* features a nursemaid on whom the protagonist relies heavily, but who rarely figures into discussions of the novella’s feminist politics; this figure parallels Fulvia, the maid whom the suffering Carol treats with distracted ignorance.

Such lack of interest in examining one’s social place means that the concerns of public,

subaltern subjectivities – such as those of the service workers – are necessarily subordinated to the narrative of private, privileged interests. Such thinking dovetails not just with normative social patterns, but with normative viewing patterns as well: *If I don't see it, it doesn't matter. If I can't read it, it isn't there*. Such thinking, of course, is precisely what allows us the illusion of omniscience and total control as film viewers.³⁹ But Haynes's camera actually reifies this thinking, and explodes that illusion – that what is not clearly or immediately visible must be less important, and vice versa. The scene with Carol's doctor exemplifies this: as he is informing her that the tests do not show conclusive results, we hear an inexplicable hissing sound (figure 1). The camera cuts to a shot of a nurse spraying cleaning fluid in a corner of the room (figure 2), then back to Carol, who screams, "Please don't do that!" In presenting the sound of the chemical spray before presenting the body of the nurse who is spraying, the film figures the subordination of the latter to the former. The suggestion is that the nurse's actions will have long-lasting effects on Carol's body even after the nurse herself is gone. The functions that lower-status bodies serve, in other words, whether good or bad, are more primary, even more permanent, than the bodies themselves. And the figure of Carol helps, ironically, to index this hegemonic point. The regimes of visibility – those which refute her health complaints on the grounds that no concrete causes are appearing "on the [medical] tests," and which fail to see her as a possible AIDS patient – have just made a victim out of *her*. And yet the nurse is, in turn, victimized: we might say that Carol's rebuke is upsetting not for its very utterance but for its blindness to the demands of the nurse's job, not to mention the nurse's physical well-being. But an even more pressing point stands: whether Haynes intends it or not, the *camera*, and, subsequently, we as viewers, are blind to these things – until we become momentarily aware of our own blindness. That is, the film registers the gaps dominant epistemology allows for, rather than letting them stand: the

initial frame in which the nurse does *not* appear constitutes the same kind of epistemology that allows us to not actually see certain bodies immediately or centrally, or to not conceive of their existence outside of the field of more important bodies; the nurse's appearance thereafter cannot but comment upon, and briefly rectify, her prior absence.

Such scenes have deep overtones of class domination, particularly considering the ways in which Carol is casual or even ignorant about the status of lower-class workers such as Fulvia – even as she benefits from their work. Instances such as the nurse's delayed entrance into the frame, then, constitute a return of the socioeconomically repressed, of the hidden means of capitalism and privilege. Various other shots, such as the one which opens on Carol's empty living room, advance these same critical ideas. Therein, we can hear both a vacuum cleaner and a radio, but see no people. Carol eventually enters the frame and calls, "Fulvia? Fulvia?" to the maid who remains offscreen. The underpaid, underappreciated labor of workers of color is not simply "invisible" to people like Carol, her husband, and her stepson, it is invisible to the camera itself. We might also note that Carol invokes Fulvia's name more than any other in the film, here even calling out to her *before* she calls out her husband's name. I suggest that, at such moments, we might grow particularly suspicious of readings of the film that find it functioning centrally as a critique of patriarchy, and of Carol's subordinate status within that system. In fact, Carol's overall inarticulateness – which many critics have dwelled on in gendered terms⁴⁰ – here gives way to an insistent and at least semi-confident harnessing of language in the repeated mantra, "Fulvia? Fulvia?" Moreover, this scene scrutinizes upper-class domination, not (just) male heterosexist authority. For one thing, Fulvia is literally at Carol's beck and call. But perhaps more interesting is the fact that the film shows Fulvia to be more directly associated with Carol's home and its workings than Carol herself. In an early scene, for example, we see Carol ask

Fulvia where to find the phone book. Fulvia also comes in closer contact with all manner of household pollution, from the noise pollution of the vacuum cleaner to the chemicals in the cleaning fluids she uses to the preservatives in the food she handles, and yet Carol is the one who ultimately seeks treatment for toxic exposure. Carol's call to Fulvia thus constitutes an ironic invocation of the maid's supposed domestic sovereignty, an invocation that simultaneously calls attention to (hidden) structural inequalities.⁴¹

Whereas Farmer and Bullard detail the ghettoizing effects of environmental racism, in *Safe* we see how it might also take its form, maybe even its most insidious form, in the ghettoization of people of color and lower class *within* spheres of privilege. Though it may seem like a kind of righting of hierarchal imbalances, the suffering housewife's ability to employ service people like Fulvia constitutes a deployment of hierarchism: it asserts for Carol a place of dominance in those spheres. Thus, when critics write of how *Safe* exemplifies the "dreary emptiness of women's lives" (Davis 185), of how Carol's home "constantly restricts her movements" (Potter 130), or of Carol's "unbearably restrictive social role" (Naismith 368), we might object on a few counts. Only a very particular type of woman within this film, and of course outside of it, has the *privilege* of an empty life. And those who help make that life empty are restricted on multiple levels. While many have argued that Haynes's wide-angle shots indicate that Carol is overwhelmed by the vastness of her house,⁴² we might suspect that those shots also ask us to think about how overwhelming it is actually to *maintain* such a vast space, and how cruelly ironic it is that one's very familiarity with such a space precisely marks one's alienation from it, socially and economically. To put it another way, Fulvia is expected to master the intricacies of another person's domain, a domain that, at the end of the day, she has no claim to, and which overwhelms her with both its size and its health-threatening "needs." In short,

then, considering the ways in which Carol's centrality is qualified, and that wide angle shots can thus (also) be read as indexing *Fulvia's* dread, any courting of second-wave feminist sympathies on the film's part seems to be rather wry.

The staging of bodies in one particular scene, in fact, ironizes the kinds of feminist readings Davis and Doane et al. have offered. About halfway through the film, Carol attends a baby shower at a friend's house. This scene is incredibly rich for several reasons: first, the figure of Carol's friend's Latina maid is the one truly restricted and overwhelmed by domestic space here: while the party guests freely move about, she is relegated to the kitchen. Those white women who move across the frame frequently cover her up, blocking our visual access to her. Moreover, the maid is overwhelmed by the vastness of the scope of the shot, which relegates her to the furthest reaches of the eye (figure 3). Carol then emerges out of the back of the frame on the left side and is, momentarily, geometrically parallel with the maid (figure 4). But I argue that this is a sardonic, symbolic paralleling, insofar as Carol's status, at this moment and presumably otherwise, is not parallel at all to this woman's; the fact that the maid's face is obscured, the fact that Carol is being administered to her by her friend Linda, and the next scene, which begins with a shot of Carol in the foreground again (though not in close-up), all suggest relative inequality. We see the same kind of sardonic paralleling achieved with objects, such as when Carol drinks a healthy glass of milk while painters ingest unhealthy fumes from the milky white paint they apply to the cabinets far behind her (see image 6). Nonetheless, for many of us, it may be the case that *only* Carol's body allows us to see the maid and painters, insofar as we are not accustomed to reading that deeply into a shot, unless otherwise prompted by the narrative; in the former case, the direct address to Carol by her friend forces us to seek her out in the background. Thus, *Safe* lays bare the normative operations of both cinematic and social vision/identification,

while simultaneously critiquing the effects of those operations – which include, as in this case, marginalizing particular bodies while magnifying others.

Toxic Bodies

While these literally marginal figures can be said to function on the level of commenting upon the sociocultural standards of visibility, they also play a central role in the film's explorations of illness and toxicity. The crisis seemingly driving the film is, obviously, Carol's increasingly acute sensitivity to chemicals, toxins, and pollutants. But if we can momentarily resist the engrossing "mystery" of that crisis, and read against the relative pull of Carol's body, we can see another commentary on toxicity being tendered. Every time her body comes into contact with chemicals, toxins, or pollutants, we see a person who maintains even more direct and sustained contact with those elements. To wit: Carol's very first attack reaches a crescendo as her Mercedes passes a polluting dump truck, sending her swerving off the road into a parking garage. The face of the driver – who, we might note, remains closest to the pollution by virtue of being in the vehicle – is never seen. In another scene, we watch Carol breeze in and out of a drycleaner's, the same place where she will later collapse from fumes. Yet the breeziness of this first encounter almost allows us to ignore the person who works at the dry cleaner's day-in and day-out: a middle-aged Asian-American woman. And in yet another scene, we watch Carol visit a beauty parlor. While the white beautician tending to her works with dyes and chemicals all day long, it is Carol whose nose begins to bleed. In each case, we are prevented from exploring the lower-status experience of exposure to toxicity, because in each case the camerawork parallels the very experience of white, upper-class privilege: it confers mobility; it offers the option – if only temporary – of leaving the scene of infection, pollution, and degradation. It represses not only the evidence of class and race inequality, but also the effects of that inequality on individual

bodies. In short, while the spheres of privilege and non-privilege overlap to the degree that Carol *does* encounter contaminated workplace ghettos, and workers encounter *her*, there is a difference: neither she nor we, as viewers, *sustain* contact with the sources of toxins or the people associated with them.

We cannot forget that Carol *does* become ill, nonetheless. Above, I have described how *Safe* holds out the potential explanation of AIDS. And this would have radical implications on its own for class and race: while the lower-status persons in the film are even more recessed than Carol, and while lower-status bodies have long been more associated with disease, the irony could be that they are *not* actually diseased while Carol is. But the film, apropos of its reluctance to offer definitive answers or closure, offers several other explanations – particularly troubling explanations – and holds these up for examination as well. Halfway through the film, we hear a voiceover on TV mention deep ecology (the voiceover that Laura Christian has dubbed a “non sequitur”). In simplest terms, deep ecology is a radical philosophy developed in the 1980s that advocates a transformation in humans’ relationship to the earth, such that “biocentrism” replaces “anthropocentrism.” According to Murray Bookchin, “implicit in deep ecology is the notion that a ‘humanity’ exists that accurses the natural world; that individual selfhood must be transformed into a cosmic ‘Selfhood’ that essentially transcends the person and his or her uniqueness” (11). Not surprisingly, then, this approach has been widely criticized for being misanthropic (which many of its followers readily admit), racist, and even fascist at its core: according to Bookchin, deep ecology “ignore[s] class, ethnic difference, imperialism, and oppression by creating a grab bag called Humanity that is placed in opposition to a mystified Nature, divested of all development” (18). This description is strikingly reminiscent of Wrenwood’s privatizing mantras: “What you’re seeing outside is a reflection of what you’re feeling inside,” “The only

person that can make you get sick is you,” and so forth. Envirohealth problems, in both cases, are reduced to human “malfunction” or character deficiencies.

Such statements obviously elide corporate, governmental, and patriarchal responsibility for environmental degradation and other tragedies. To cite one example, a Wrenwood patient who discloses the fact that she was sexually abused by a male family member is told that she feels bad because she has not yet let go of her anger toward her abuser; while this may be a viable psychological diagnosis in part, the primary trauma of sexual abuse by an adult in power is thereby swept aside. And such statements also have particularly disturbing implications for those lower-class and non-white individuals I have been concerned with here: privatization has the effect not just of taking attention away from structural inequalities, but of actually pathologizing poverty and other states of inequality. The “unsafe” body in such scenarios is not just blamed for toxifying others, but for its own toxicity. The latter idea has Darwinian undertones – implying that the toxic body’s toxicity will ultimately, and perhaps ideally, bring about its own demise. And here, we are not very far from deep ecology’s most troubling implications: Bookchin has traced the philosophy’s indebtedness to fascistic theories of social Darwinism and Malthusian population control, theories that not only privilege the white and affluent as the “fittest,” but which inform racist arguments against immigration and minority overpopulation. *Safe* includes oblique references to these kinds of arguments, such as when Carol’s stepson Rory writes a school essay on non-white gangs who are encroaching upon the Valley and slaughtering each other – perhaps taking care of those very population problems in the process. The idea that the lower-class bodies we barely get to see might, indeed, be afflicted with physical or immunological problems is irrelevant within the dominant visual/social logic that deep ecology, somewhat paradoxically, trades in; if such afflictions were believed to exist,

they would simply be understood as predetermined or deserved.

The belief that undesirable bodies deserve and even effect their own eradication does not leave us terribly far from the belief systems that prevailed around AIDS in the 1980s – and which continue in some conservative and religious circles today.⁴³ It is not at all surprising, then, that AIDS has actually been celebrated by some of deep ecology’s more radical adherents on the basis of a kind of “organic eugenics,”⁴⁴ as well as on the basis of extreme biocentrism (viruses, in this uber-“pro-life” rhetoric, are to be left to their own devices, which will include reducing overpopulation). For example, in 1987, the same year in which *Safe* is set, deep ecologist Christopher Manes published the editorial “Population and AIDS” under the pseudonym “Miss Ann Thropy” in the journal of radical deep ecology group *Earth First!*. Illustrating the utter disregard for (or deep appreciation of?) structural inequalities that so chills Bookchin, Manes claimed that “if the AIDS epidemic didn’t exist, radical environmentalists would have to invent it.” Considering all of these resonances, we can see how *Safe*’s litany of moments that can be written off as non-sequiturs – the TV segment on deep ecology, the reference to gang warfare – actually constitute sites for engagement with dominant social discourses. These moments ask us to consider how moral standards construct our conceptions of illness; how certain bodily experiences are naturalized and/or made grounds for blame; and how institutions and groups justify their lack of concern for particular bodies.

The notion that the toxic body is at fault has, as I have described, troubling resonance. Just as Carol is told at Wrenwood that her internal mechanisms are at fault – she has not, to use deep ecological-speak, transformed her relationship to the outside world, and this “wrongness” is manifesting itself in the form of illness – the privatizing move of locating poor health outcomes within an individual elides corporate, governmental, and patriarchal responsibility for pollution

and abuse. But I want to suggest a way in which we might not actually wish to see Carol as wholly spared by this logic; that we might not read her as the same kind of pawn in blame-the-victim games that lower-class workers are. Returning to Bookchin's idea that deep ecology, "despite all its social rhetoric, has virtually no real sense that our ecological problems have their ultimate roots in society and in social problems" (3), we realize that social awareness and empathy are precisely what we never see Carol demonstrate. She never truly connects with any of her peers, much less those lower-class persons and racial Others who provide services for her. If Carol's illness is figured as a failure or lack of empathy, then, perhaps it is not (just) that *figuring* that is troubling, but that lack. In fact, even if the "real" diagnosis for her illness *is* AIDS, the same point would be relevant: Carol, even in the most subtle of ways, always fails to see how the experiences of others might extend across racial and class boundaries to meet with hers.

We could thus say that Carol's lack of empathy stands in some relationship (whether causal or auxiliary) to her ill health, in a kind of twisted poetic justice. But the film also raises the possibility of blaming other bodies – only to provide the occasion for anti-racist, anti-hegemonic critique. At one point, we watch Carol listening to headphones, and the narration she hears becomes the voiceover on film. This voice tells us that "safe bodies need safe environments in which to live." I contend that the move here, from captured dialogue to film voiceover, indicates that this discourse is a hegemonic one –the kind that organizes readerly/viewerly tendencies at large, not just those of Carol herself. But as we have seen, and will continue to see, "safe" is normally deployed as a self-evident concept, yet it proves contingent upon examination. And as we have seen, and will continue to see, Carol's own readerly/visualizing tendencies disregard lower-class bodies and their experiences.

To take this discourse unquestioningly, then, is to replicate those same dominant values.

Specifically, the qualification of “*safe*” bodies indicates that not *all* bodies need, or deserve, safe environments. Who are these safe bodies, then, in this hegemonic view? In one sense the film clearly indicates an answer: the bodies that end up at the Wrenwood retreat later on belong to overwhelmingly white and middle-to-upper class people;⁴⁵ money is never spoken of, though certainly such a large-scale live-in retreat cannot be inexpensive. But even further, the film indicates what “*unsafe*” bodies look like in the hegemonic view. That early hospital scene is one of many examples in which toxicity is directly associated with, even *personified* by, a worker of lower-class status and/or lower racial positioning. These figures, in short, are suggested as potential carriers of infection and toxicity. I have already described how Carol – otherwise passive, gentle, and soft-spoken – takes this association as grounds for vitriol rather than sympathy or even *empathy*, plainly indicating that not all bodies are “safe” bodies, and that some therefore deserve “safe” environments more than others. After having watched the empathy-fest of an environmental illness meeting Carol attends early on, we might expect her to be concerned with the fact that the hospital nurse is directly exposing herself to toxins, and for sustained periods of worktime. Instead, we got her sharp-tongued demand to not “do that!” – that which is actually part of the woman’s job. We realize, through Carol, that to assume that only “obviously”-risky and presumably toxic bodies are threats is to (wrongly) assume one’s safety in a privileged environment. And here *Safe* indicates the elitist, racist, and classist dimensions of such assumptions.

The fact that these Othered bodies do not display physical symptoms of toxicity in the same ways Carol does must be addressed. They do not vomit, they do not seize, they do not bleed – at least not to our eyes. How then to explain this difference? And more pressingly for my

argument, why read them as equally, if not more, threatened than Carol? To answer these questions, we need to return to the regimes of visibility yet again. If *Safe* criticizes the notions – so central to film viewing itself – that vision is, simply, knowledge, and that the unseen is irrelevant, then it would be reasonable to state that the non-signifying character of lower-class/non-white bodies is not meant to indicate a lack of pain and suffering. As with Deleuze and Guattari's Dr. Schreber, discussed in Chapter 3, we might begin to doubt the correspondence between signifier and signified, the idea that one cannot exist without the other. Specifically, *Safe*'s questioning and undermining of normative epistemologies should make us suspicious of easy equations such as that lack of *evidence* for pain means a lack of pain. This point has material, and not just theoretical, implications: lower-status bodies are often prohibited, directly or indirectly, from showing pain when on the job and/or in the presence of their employers. In fact, showing physical vulnerability, especially in a working situation that offers few or no health benefits, may make an already-precarious employment situation even more so. By juxtaposing those working-class bodies with Carol's, Haynes's film critiques the ways that racism and classism affect our ability, and our willingness, to recognize and interpret pain. In the best-case scenario, women like Carol simply do not look for pain in bodies that are unlike theirs; in the worst-case scenario, they are willing to admit to its existence, but not moved by this knowledge to act on it.⁴⁶

Not surprisingly, theorists such as David Morris have found that race has long played a role in constructing definitions and understandings of pain. As he writes, "Enlightenment thinkers on primitivism celebrated the pain-free state of the natural savage, who supposedly did not suffer the debilitating illnesses and nervous disorders of the 'hypersensitive' European races" (39). But the treatment of such Othered groups has hardly been venerative in kind. Morris quotes

the writings of Dr. J. Marion Sims, “America’s most distinguished gynecological surgeon,” on his appalling 1817 experiments on slave women: “Negresses ... will bear cutting with nearly, if not quite, as much impunity as dogs and rabbits” (40). Contemporary studies indicate that pain and suffering are still disproportionately recognized on the basis of race. Researchers from Georgetown and Duke, for example, found in 2000 that black patients are less likely to be referred for certain invasive cardiac procedures despite presenting with the same symptoms as white patients.⁴⁷ While I do not mean to suggest that pain is experienced in the same way across cultures and time (indeed, Morris’s book shows that, just as, say, “gender” is not constant across those categories, neither is “pain”), it is clear that racial hierarchies have allowed those in power to discount the somatic experiences of those deemed “Other,” and/or to figure those Othered bodies as somehow hardier, more durable, and thus more suited to labor and other physical challenges. And it is then the very hierarchical process of naturalizing difference (“Negresses ... bear cutting” or, say, “Mexicans are well-suited as field laborers”) that prevents us from comprehending, or, in the case of the film, literally *seeing*, how “unsafe” bodies might experience suffering as a dehumanization just as “safe” bodies do.

In the specific case I have given above, the visual marginalization of people of color can be taken as a reification of their *socioeconomic* marginalization, within the film’s world and, we might say, our own. But more interesting in filmic terms is how our familiarity with classical narrative film threatens to produce formally conservative readings of the film, even against Haynes’s nonnormative techniques. For example, the spectacle of Carol’s seemingly changed and changing body threatens to override the marginal body’s routine experience of constant exposure – leaving intact, yet partially unmasked, the logic that finds such oppression unremarkable in terms of its narrative flatness. Such spectacularity might even be an acquired

effect of Carol's and the narrative's otherwise flat character; for the average film viewer, *something* must compensate for such flatness. To put it another way, the perception that Carol's changes are "spectacular" only arises by contrast to the mundaneness of everyday exposure. Indeed, the development of, say, cancer due to long-term chemical exposure, or eventual nerve damage due to pollutants or accidents, or the experience of chronic pain due to physical labor, cannot be represented within the space of a conventional narrative feature film – not to mention the fact labor in general is notably uncondusive to storytelling in its repetitive and static character. But we must remember that the film interrogates the standards of the classical narrative arc, suggesting it to be andro- and heterocentric in character rather than neutral or natural. Thus, *Safe*'s gestures toward the unrepresentability of lower-class and non-white pain appear to us not as endorsements thereof, but as calls for shifted attention – and, moreover, these gestures suggest that racial and class oppression are intimately related to gender and sexual oppression. Put most simply, the film suggests that we cannot, and do not, see the experiences of service workers because they are simply "unrepresentable" within dominant visual and narrative frameworks.

Of course, the limitations *Safe* critically reifies do not always or obviously "feel" like limitations. It is certainly nothing new in film theory to say that the vantage point of the viewer is one of epistemological privilege, of apparent omniscience. And as that epistemological privilege actually converges with the thematic contents of the film – the search for an explanation for Carol's illness, for a cure, for a resolution – it potentially goes unquestioned. That is, just as Carol's body – imagined as "safe" – demands to be read by her husband, her doctor, and her psychiatrist, we may find ourselves complying with that demand, choosing to privilege her relatively centered position on the screen, and her predominance in most scenes. What falls out

of such readings, in a way that indicts us and our habits, are those bodies that are even less scrutable than hers – those in the furthest distance, those at the furthest margins, those that are more obscure in both senses of the word: barely readable to the cinematic and human eye, and darker (and thus “unreadable” or *unworthy* of being read). The challenge for us as viewers, then, is to try to read against the very machinations of the apparatus that offers us unimpeachable authority – a move that will take us beyond the obvious, beyond solipsistic or limited feminist interests, and ultimately allow us to be attuned to the ways in which oppression manifests itself in particularly environmental and spatial terms. Returning to the fact that we never *do* reach a cause, an explanation, a cure, a resolution, we are, at the last, better able to recognize those habits, even if we have not previously made those attunements.

But even if we agree to the challenge of reading against dominant narrative/visual standards, we realize that we are still restrained; our paths to knowledge and understanding have already been set for us. This realization, however, reveals the film viewer’s epistemological privilege to be, in most cases, a normative effect of classical film technique; a satisfying illusion of agency rather than actual agency. To be clear on how this works: whether they are intentionally positioned or not, *Safe* is full of obscured, distant, and literally/figuratively marginal bodies. When we strain to see them, we strain to see beyond the work of Haynes’s camera. And we then encounter very real structural barriers: we are still largely barred from seeing the faces of the potentially toxified racial and economic Other, and from dwelling on those faces when we *do* see them. To understand the implications of these limitations, we might consider the work of theorists ranging from Wittgenstein to Elaine Scarry⁴⁸ on how the human body, and the face in particular, is not just the central register for pain and suffering in our culture, but the central site for empathy. In so often refusing us total access to these registers and

sites in a film *centered* on pain and suffering, *Safe* points us to the occlusions and limitations of dominant perspectives – classical narrative film and typical film viewing habits not being the least of these perspectives – even as it forces us to experience the subjugated position of restraint, of being subject to the masterful direction of another.

“Where Am I? Right Now?”: House is Environment

“House *as* Environment” is one way to think of *Safe*’s project. But for this project – which includes questioning the ways that racist and heteronormative assumptions lead us to read bodies vis-à-vis environments in particular ways – to work, environment within the film cannot stand as a simple metaphor. The safety promised by metaphor, by its status as *approximation* rather than *equivalence*, its distance rather than its precision, is what the film seeks to obliterate. This is the fantasy that the characters within the film, and many of us outside of it, labor under: while a house might be an environment (technically, it is a space), it provides a haven from “*the* environment.” The house, in contemporary U.S. society, has been idealized as the opposite of what we believe about nature: the house is safe, rational, and just (not threatening, irrational, or amoral).⁴⁹ Moreover, the house’s status as “shelter” means that it must be clearly differentiated from the natural elements. Houses are thereby understood as “inside,” and the outside is what we then call “the environment,” or “nature.” Difference, then, is constituted by disavowal (of that which is consigned to the heap of the “other”) and human superiority is established through the identification with the house (culture) against its outside (nature). As Gaston Bachelard slyly notes in his exploration of the poetic archetypes of inside-outside, “we feel warm *because* it is cold out-of-doors” (39, emphasis original).

Not coincidentally, then, the mark of the affluent, ideal Western home is insularity.⁵⁰ Bachelard writes of the ideal house as one that “invites mankind to heroism of cosmic

proportions,” calling it “an instrument with which to confront the cosmos” (46). Julia Kristeva has written of the body in a similar sense: she imagines abjection in its various forms (including but not limited to defecation and vomiting) as an attempt at establishing the kinds of boundaries to which Bachelard refers – between indoors and outdoors, and between the inside and the outside. But the problem is that “inside” can never be truly inside, and “outside” can never be truly outside: as Laura Christian writes, drawing on Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, “it is precisely the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that the abject destabilizes” (107).⁵¹ Christian, in fact, has drawn on Kristeva to analyze the abject’s role in *Safe*. She remarks that, as the outside is constitutive of the inside, abjection is a process that must be repeated over and over without end; this compulsion can be found, for example, in the ways that Carol constantly obsesses over “the upkeep and renovation of her home” (108).

Christian finds this kind of obsessiveness to be potentially generative of audience pathos. However, we can see *Safe* delighting in abjection’s impossibilities and failures, and how these highlight the discriminatory procedures it occasions – the constant, insistent repetition of “Me-Not Me,” “Self-Other,” “Insider-Outsider.” First, if Fulvia is the abject by virtue of her lower-class status, her color, and her presumable toxicity, it is thus something of an irony that she is a fixture within the White home. When Rory reads his essay about the incursion of black and Chicano gangs into the Valley at the dinner table, Fulvia, herself Latina and perhaps Chicana, reaches past him to clear the plates: his childish racism is not merely ignorant of how Fulvia might be offended, but ostensibly blind to the fact that “foreigners” have already invaded the sacred space of his home – and currently move throughout it with greater familiarity than his own stepmother, painting cabinets, fixing meals, and receiving the Whites’ money for doing so. Secondly, *Carol*’s fixity within the home is thrown into question by various means, suggesting

the imprecision of insider-outsider schemas. To take two examples: near the beginning of the film, we see her stumble around her own living room and have difficulty locating everyday objects. Then, near the film's middle, Greg approaches Carol while she is writing a letter and she suddenly becomes bewildered, gasping, "Where am I? Right now?" Carol's question expresses disorientation, but also invokes denaturalization. Its very utterance defamiliarizes and queers her home, a space thought to be, by definition, the familiar and the safe. The film hereby also militates against the naturalization of certain bodily experiences, such that those experiences are believed to be reasonable or even necessary extensions of the environs in which those bodies appear. That is, Carol's disorientation marks her body as alienated from her home when it "should" be safely, familiarly, ensconced within it.

Through these failures of inside(r)-outside(r) logic, the film explicates historical understandings of the public and private, and their attendant racial politics. As Linda Kerber states, "one of our culture's presuppositions has been that men and women live in separate spheres" (31) – respectively, the public/economic and the private/domestic. But she and other historically astute feminist critics have drawn attention to the over-totalizing nature of these imagined divisions, as well as their troubling implications. To begin with, as the home in the public imagination became figured as the private realm of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this figuration obfuscated the ideological, and physical, labor behind the concept of the home. As Susan Buckingham-Hatfield explains, "the *traditional family* ... is a socially constructed response to [historical] conditions ... and is as much an ideal as a reality[,] as a percentage of women have continued to work outside the home throughout the twentieth century" (65, emphasis original). The logic of public vs. private also involves an additional layer of ignorance: the inability to conceive of the class and race differences that made, and continue

to make, such theoretical delimitations possible. For example, to have a woman's place actually be in the home often requires that she have domestic labor – which is more likely than not performed by lower-class women of color. But “public vs. private” maintains more than a cultural ignorance; it has ensured that “women” actually denotes “privileged white women.” As Kerber remarks, the “language of separate spheres [has] helped historians avoid thinking about race; virtually all discussion of the subject until very recently has focused on the experience of white women, mostly of the middle class” (37).

Safe's expansion of the notion of “environment” also brings to light the gendered dimensions of environmental racism – a consideration not often made in work on the subject. It suggests that seemingly benign work environments such as an upper-class family's home can have as detrimental effects on a worker's health as more clearly malignant ones such as factories and fields. But it also specifically puts the lie to the fantasy of privatization that so often accompanies women's servicework in the home. Work as a maid, nanny, housekeeper, and so forth is often thought of as a simple extension of the work that women already do. This notion naturalizes and stabilizes traditional female roles while downplaying the actual labor required of such workers. In fact, as this “pink-collar ghetto” has become less white and less affluent over time,⁵² it has had insidious effects. The disparity in social and economic class between maids and housewives, for example, is papered over by the purportedly undemanding nature of the latter's work, while the “pleasant” work atmosphere and the idea, whether fallacious or not, that a housekeeper, maid, or nanny is considered “part of the family” is often thought of as partial compensation for work.⁵³ In fact, this familiarity is precisely what potentially allows service work to not seem like work in the first place.

Much criticism of *Safe* has actually had this effect, unselfconsciously conflating the

domestic existence of the worker (maids and housekeepers are, in fact, colloquially termed “domestics”⁵⁴) with that of the woman of the house. Besides having the same consequence of making “women” into a term encompassing only white privileged women, such criticism engages in the fantasy that all women in (a) (the) home are part of a cohesive domestic system, untainted by the market or the pesky differences of race and class. For example, Mary Ann Doane writes that “Carol’s struggle with the color of the couches testifies to the heavy weight of the minutiae of everyday life, of the constant effort to keep up the home” (7) – a claim that collapses *Fulvia*’s actual position into Carol’s (Carol herself makes virtually *no* efforts to keep up the home), and that elides the fact that these “minutiae” are actually farmed out to workers who do not live in “the home.”

The film itself does occasionally make such moves. For example, we never see Fulvia outside of the White house, and never learn anything about her personal life; it seems at first that, within the fabric of the film, she simply does not exist outside of this domestic space. Further, one might say that such formations are “normal” because Carol is the protagonist. But there are several caveats to such points. First, as I have argued throughout this chapter, Haynes’s film questions the idea that normative ways of seeing (or not seeing) are believing, and it specifically problematizes exclusive attention to Carol. In thus opening us up to consider other figures/bodies, the film allows us to consider the existence of those bodies outside of the field of Carol’s body/personal sphere, *and* outside of the frame itself – a move that classical, protagonist-driven films rarely ask, allow, or even want us to do. Secondly, in such scenes as the one in which Carol enters an empty space and she and we hear Fulvia’s work, but do not see Fulvia’s body, *Safe* actually troubles the conflation of the domestic (worker) with the domestic (space). The ideally-domesticated “outsider” is momentarily out of reach – thereby drawing attention to

the tightly-policed and monitored, yet supposedly natural, borders of hierarchized home space. After all, such moments read like occasions for panic; Carol insistently calls to Fulvia, making legible as a potential cause for concern, rather than business as usual, the outsider's domestication within the home. And, for some of us, the (unmet) concern that something bad has happened or is about to happen is piqued.⁵⁵ Such panic suggests just how ideologically important that conflation is to those in positions of power: yet again, dominant forces seek to fold certain bodies into their environments in ways that serve dominant purposes, and in ways that make their potential suffering look very "unqueer," or unremarkable. Fulvia must be folded into the White house, but not such that she is no longer able to be surveilled, not such that she might not actually have to do work (after all, what *is* Fulvia doing upstairs with the radio on, one might ask?), not such that she cannot be found when Carol needs her.

Fulvia, in other words, becomes a potential enemy to conservative obfuscatory logic on two levels: she "taints" the domestic with its imagined opponent, the economic (the "outside"), at the same time that she exposes as fantasy the idea that a house is a space with strong borders, with a clear differentiation between "inside[r]" and "outside[r]," between "the house" and "the environment." We might say she is thereby figured as an environmental pollutant vis-à-vis the ideal of the ordered, logical, domestic private house – at the same time that she is herself subjected to pollution. These are the threats which must be neutralized through the process of naturalization, and through the paradoxical folding of Fulvia into the house. But, through Fulvia, the film triggers a realization of these operations. Fulvia does not actually stay invisible to the camera, though she is marginalized. And though she is constantly interpellated as one of the family, she doesn't match the White family physically (they are fair while she is dark), linguistically (we hear her speaking Spanish, and listening to Spanish-language radio), or even

sartorially – as she always wears a uniform. This detail, I argue, is no minor point. Fulvia’s maid’s uniform is one of the things that marks the film as “retro-feeling” – specifically, 1950s-esque (see page 4, and note 1, again) – and the effect of this anachronism is to reify the otherwise-invisibilized relations of domestic labor. That is, *Safe*’s costuming opposes the contemporary liberalism that “allows” maids to wear regular clothes, further minimizing their status as laborers. Finally, the unresolvable tensions of the public-private system that that hidden economy *seeks* to resolve are pointedly raised for us at such moments as when Rory reads his essay: his indictment of the incursion of people like Fulvia into his home, while she works “naturally” and “effortlessly” around him, reminds us that while the Whites want to cover up Fulvia’s work, they paradoxically do not truly want to accept her as one of their own.

I would also note that the critical impulses of Doane et al. are strenuously opposed by the blatantly ironic moments of the film. I argue that these filmic scenarios of domestication expose the disturbing implications thereof, *and* the ability to cover up those implications – indicating the very process of ideological naturalization itself. For example, when the wrong couches are delivered to Carol’s home, she says to Fulvia, “I don’t believe this!” She maintains eye contact with the maid as she lodges her complaint by telephone, shaking her head and throwing her hands in the air in frustration. Fulvia stands silently in the doorway all the while, watching. Carol’s attempted interpellation of Fulvia as an equal can only, to the critical ear, resound loudly in its utter ridiculousness. It suggests not only that Fulvia would empathize with her, but that Fulvia should take the mistake as seriously as Carol does, as if this were Fulvia’s home as well. Such efforts attempt to domesticate the outsider to the extent that she does not overtly trouble the ideal of hermeticism for this “insiders’” space, and in order to mentally manage the incursion of the economic. Domestic work is naturalized, and made not to look like work at all – a move that,

not coincidentally, peremptorily militates against accusations of (environmental) racism. (Such ideological domestication may also be necessary to the degree that marginal figures such as non-white, non-U.S. individuals are often thought of as less than human, or even intrinsically bestial.) Contrarily, *Safe* exposes as forced and forceful the social arrangements otherwise deemed “natural.”

The fact that pink-collar work is rarely thought of or recognized as “real work” by many critics of *Safe*, by policymakers in the “real world,” and by other cultural arbiters means that what Arlie Hochschild defined as the “second shift” is, for such workers, made further invisible.⁵⁶ If it is true that “poor women ... are particularly disadvantaged by environmental degradation[,] as they are not usually in a position to delegate the household chores which expose them to environmental vulnerability” (Buckingham-Hatfield 80), it is certainly notable that this particular woman, Fulvia, also does “household chores” *for a living*. *Safe*’s redefinition of the home as a (work) environment for women like Fulvia, then, critiques the general fantasy that “home” stands in contrast to “environment” – and that “inside” stands neatly in opposition to “outside,” in multiple ways. And it does so with a keen eye toward how the often-gendered terms of that fantasy manage to obfuscate the risks and labor-intensiveness of service work. In fact, if we return to the list of service workers that I included at the beginning of this section, we see that most of these occupations are strongly gender-coded.⁵⁷ Movers are almost always thought of as men, while manicurists are always thought of as women, for example. Such gender stratification has a notable effect: toxification is further naturalized on the level of gender, beyond race and class. That is, the particular health risks of lower-status jobs are invisibilized by how they “match” the gendered body of the worker: (male) movers have brute strength and therefore, say, back injury is a simple likelihood; (female) maids are unskilled except in the ways of

domesticity, and, therefore, are obligated to suffer the risks of, say, chemical exposure.

The fact that marginal bodies within the film do not overtly reject, react to, or display signs of toxic exposure – *do not look “queer,” in short* – is thus particularly meaningful, despite being literally imperceptible: whether the marginalized body is figured as always already containing toxins, as immune to toxins, or as able to absorb toxins, these figurations parallel how their raced, gendered, and classed attributes are figured as natural rather than constructed within the dominant thinking of the film’s milieu. *Safe* indicates yet again that the logic of the dramatic narrative arc can be a rather deadly one: the fact that these bodies are immediately written off as unsafe (and, thus, “unqueer” vis-à-vis their experiences) means that their unsafe experiences do not constitute a drama worth watching. They cannot appear to us through the prism of dramatic irony the way Carol’s body might, as there seems to be nothing dramatic, or ironic, about their experiences of toxification, whatever those might be. This deployment of narrative logic, like the deployments of cinematic and social visual epistemologies that *Safe* showcases for us, proves itself to be just like Carol’s doctor’s testing: it comes with prejudices and predeterminations intact, and shows only what it has been calculated to show.

Conclusion

I see the positions of particular bodies within *Safe* as non-essentialist, though they may be deterministic. To say that bodies are products of their environments, or *victims* of their environments, is not to say their fates are inherent, deserved, or inevitable. In fact, it is precisely to say that those bodies’ toxicities and vulnerabilities (and, surely, those are not opposing terms) are constructed by dominant values, and understood through the terms of those values. Speaking of Carol in particular, Lisa Lynch writes that her “illness matters less than the interpretive structures that frame [her] understanding” of herself as a woman who is ill (204). And while

Carol does stand in contrast to those bodies, the same is clearly true of them: their ontological status as *actually toxic* or not (just like Carol's ontological status as *actually AIDS-ridden* or not) is less important than the beliefs that would steer us towards one view or the other. To return to the scene with which I began: Linda's brother, though wrongly "accused" of having AIDS, is nonetheless dead. Linda's poorly-articulated denial of this AIDS status stands in sharp contrast to the tenacious power of gossip she alludes to, figuring a particularly tragic fate: even if not *actually* dead from AIDS, Linda's brother is at least *symbolically* dead from it, paying for his "sin" of failing to enter a heterosexual marriage and reproduce. "Interpretive structures" thus trump physical ontology. And the naturalization of certain statuses and conditions (unmarried people, naturally, *must* get AIDS; people of lower status, naturally, *will* suffer health risks) means that we ignore the question of environments yet again – their constructedness; the logics imposed on the objects and bodies orbiting within them; the ideological work that welds "safe environments" to "safe bodies," and "unsafe environments" to "unsafe bodies," and then covers over that very welding.

This summation may seem like cause for despair. But we might end here by thinking of the brackets around the word "Safe" in the opening credits of the film, and on its packaging – the brackets that have lead some critics, such as Lynch, to actually represent the film's title as "[*Safe*]."⁵⁸ These brackets are foreboding, guarded, and hermetic, at first glance. But like "scare quotes," these brackets can be said to ironize the very term they encapsulate. They are the punctuational equivalent of Derrida's supplement,⁵⁹ and in a very visual, and *spatial*, or even *environmental*, sense. They create vulnerabilities, paths of attack, in their inability to fully seal up the word "safe" – making it, at the same moment, unsafe. As Gaye Naismith writes, "the gaping space between each bracket ... suggest[s] that no amount of ideological work can

guarantee any system full immunity from the ‘corrupting’ influence of the external environment” (384). But we might think of this from the perspective of the “corrupt.” These brackets make clear the counterforce of contamination, of Mary Douglas’s “dirt,” of Douglas Crimp’s “disease.” After all, the film’s indictment of the systems that construct our concepts of dirt and disease opens up aporias in those systems. As we imagine the ways in which “knowledge” of bodily states and statuses, and their highly naturalized “natures,” are in fact contingent, contextual, and ideological, and as we come to understand that perceptions, and not just biological events, can transform bodies, we can resist the symbolic and literal death sentences I have explored here. Those brackets are, after all, conspicuously open to any eyes trained on them – even, and perhaps especially, those deemed “corrupt,” “dirty,” and “queer.”

Notes

¹ 1985; page 210.

² As I will argue, this decision has at least two effects. First, it positions the filmworld in an older, more ignorant epistemological relation with AIDS, insofar as the syndrome was defined only five years prior to the film's milieu. Secondly, it contributes to a general sense of the film's milieu as "retro;" Gaye Naismith, for one, has suggested that *Safe* has something of a 1950s aesthetic. This aesthetic allows Haynes to characterize certain values as "outdated," but, more specifically, it also contributes to what I will argue is Haynes's indictment of the Reagan era's neoconservative values (often called "1950s" in character). These values, as I briefly discuss in my first section, informed the slow and unsympathetic U.S. government response to AIDS in the 1980s.

³ As I will describe, the film queers many normative film techniques. However, for these to be recognizable *as queer*, they must nonetheless work within the general parameters of conventional film. That is, *Safe* has such basic signifiers as character names that remain consistent, actors that appear throughout the entirety of the film, and scenes that seem to be in chronological order. It is generally comprehensible, and readable as a "normal" film – which is exactly how it advances its critique of the normal.

⁴ As I will note, this apparent state is something we should be rather critical of – that is, within our own habits of seeing.

⁵ I am indebted here to Roddey Reid's conception of "regime[s] of viewership." As he writes, "the film queers and goes against the grain of what could be called 'a politics and epistemology of visibility' that operates at the intersection of practices of visual culture and of official and alternative medicine" (33).

⁶ Dunning's phrase is a notable invocation of the acronym "PWA," or "Person With AIDS," an identitarian positioning that arose at the height of AIDS activism.

⁷ One technique I do not discuss in depth in this chapter is lighting. As is clear in figures 1-4 and 6, interior shots throughout *Safe* are quite dark.

⁸ As Lisa Lynch explains, "environmental illness, or multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), can be broadly defined as a breakdown of the immune system caused by chemical overexposure." It has yet to be recognized "as a medical reality by the majority of health professionals, ... [and] the CDC has not assigned diagnostic criteria for MCS" (207).

⁹ Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) states that "ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in [cultural artifacts]? ... How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? What view of nature informs ... [g]overnment reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect?" (xix).

¹⁰ "Queer ecology" is a relatively recent intellectual paradigm, spearheaded by work such as Greta Gaard's essay "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" (1997) and Catriona Sandiland's essay "Notes Toward a Queer Ecology" (2005).

¹¹ Oddly enough, several critics, including Danielle Bouchard and Jigna Desai, have unambiguously referred to Peter Dunning as "gay" (366), although his sexual orientation is never specified in the film, nor clearly indicated through any social or material markers. It seems, then, that the association between AIDS and queer sexuality has been so institutionalized that even the most careful, radical readings allow "AIDS" to point back to "gay."

¹² Many narrative theorists have suggested impulses toward such conclusions: Hayden White's *The Content of the Form*, for example, examines narrative discourse's "universality as a cultural fact," exposing "the interest that dominant social groups have not only in controlling what will pass for the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation but also in assuring the belief that social reality itself can be both lived and realistically comprehended as a story" (x).

¹³ Social death has been described by sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman as an effect of social exclusion, ostracism, or the loss of status. See also Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982).

¹⁴ Susan Winnett asks, "if [narratologists] like Brooks were conscious that the narrative dynamics and the erotics of reading they were expounding were specifically tied to an ideology of representation derivable only from the dynamics of male sexuality, would they not at least feel uncomfortable making general statements about 'narrative,' 'pleasure,' and 'us'?" (506). I, for one, cannot believe that Brooks is unaware that concepts like "tumescence" are male in connotation. But I want to cautiously suggest that that fact may not matter for his purposes, which are to limn dominant narrative form. In fact, I believe that Winnett is partially conflating dominant narrative form itself with the work of those who have defined it and/or charted its course, when she critiques the "gender bias of contemporary narratology" (506). While Brooks's discussion of "our" desire for narrative does of course assume a particular (male ... and heterosexual?) reader, one whose morphology and psychology would actually match up with classical narrative form, I both appreciate Brooks's illumination of it and, thus, his partial demystification of it – a result that does not, to my mind, necessarily make him complicit with the actual development or maintenance of the form.

¹⁵ Glyn Davis may represent an exception insofar as he claims that, at the film's end, Carol "face[s] the chaos of incomprehension, and ('I love you') embrac[es] it" (198). I find this interpretation too pat for several reasons, including that Carol is obviously mimicking the Wrenwood-ese that holds that patients are ill because of internal problems that have not yet been processed. If Carol's "I love you" is an embrace, then, it is not of chaos, but rather of the logic that holds people personally responsible for their illness.

¹⁶ See Michele Aaron's critical reader of the same name. As Davis states, "since [B. Ruby] Rich's essay [on new queer cinema in *The Village Voice*], Haynes has often been labeled as a 'new queer cinema' film-maker" (184).

¹⁷ I am, at the same time, sympathetic to Linda Singer's criticism that such shifts have served capitalist interests. The buying and selling of sex toys and pornography, for example, have replaced "free" (male-male) love in both senses of the term.

¹⁸ Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* (1990) informs us that it was only in the mid-1800s that researchers like one Dr. Michael Ryan began to use exceptional cases – such as the impregnation of comatose women – "to prove that orgasm was irrelevant to conception" (3).

¹⁹ In fact, this circumvention serves to highlight Carol's non-maternal and non-reproductive status. As for her figuration as non-maternal, Davis notes that Carol "interacts poorly with Rory and is only a peripheral observer at the baby shower" (188). In fact, Carol actually has a breakdown at this baby shower while holding a friend's young child.

²⁰ See her article, "Of Saints and Housewives: Abjection, Transgression, and Impossible Mourning in *Poison and Safe*."

²¹ Davis extends this idea to the scene of Greg and Carol's lovemaking. As he describes it, "the heterosexual union, whiteness and gendered active/passive roles are signalled and linked; the irony is Carol's absence (her vacant stare, lack of passion, and failure to interact with Greg) from this forged connection, immediately suggesting her failure to fulfil the role of idea white woman ... [and her] inability to relate 'properly' to heterosexuality" (192).

²² Of course, as she has been set up as non-maternal and non-reproductive, and her doctor never mentions a pregnancy test or its results, it seems clear that assumptions have also been made about the impossibility of her being pregnant – which is, admittedly a non-normative impossibility, unlike the assumption that she cannot have AIDS. But see page 16 again, and note 18, for a description of the relevance of Carol's non-maternity.

²³ *Safe* cannot help but comment on film viewership itself. Christian Metz famously noted the apparent "numerical 'superiority'" (43) of film, due to its synthesis of multiple axes of perception. He also described the "necessary" identification of the viewer with the camera, or at least its representative apparatus of the projector: "the spectator is

not amazed when the image ‘rotates’ ... and yet he knows he has not turned his head” (50). Like Metz, Haynes stresses that visual access does not actually equal total omniscience or control. Visual access, in fact, often serves to obscure the very fact that the viewer does *not* have complete knowledge.

²⁴ Carol’s husband is, generally speaking, a sympathetic character. He attends environmental illness meetings with Carol and visits her at Wrenwood. Throughout, however, he maintains a slightly skeptical air toward his wife.

²⁵ As Jan Zita Grover writes, “there is a significant distinction to be made between a syndrome and a disease[,] ... a distinction that is *not* commonly made in the case of AIDS ... a syndrome points to or signifies the underlying disease process(es), while a disease is constituted in and by those processes. ... [T]his is not merely a semantic distinction. Diseases [and viruses] can be communicable, syndromes cannot” (19).

²⁶ Notions of AIDS as a product of Africa, and/or as the result of contact between a monkey and a human, permeated early discourses on the disease, further inflecting the logic of epidemic with racism. It is for these reasons, and others, that I am somewhat wary of José Esteban Muñoz’s reading of *Safe* in “Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the New Queer Cinema,” which suggests that “privilege inheres in whiteness even in its portrayal as ill” (as quoted in Bouchard and Desai 361). While Carol’s existence is undeniably a privileged one, as I outline, her status as “white” is a highly unstable. In fact, I would argue that “white” and “non-white” become tenuous in opposition at the moment that “normal-looking” and “queer,” “healthy-looking” and “ill,” and “privileged” and “feared” are inscribed on the very same body by Haynes.

²⁷ As Anne Balsamo reflects, when women *are* factored into discussions around AIDS, it is in terms of their potential transmission to children, and/or their victimization by their infecting partners. As she explains, “the female body of this AIDS discourse is identified by its reproductive responsibilities and sexual connections to men. Now that it is established that women can be infected, woman’s legacy as an inherently pathological, unruly, uncontainable, but essentially passive vessel returns to haunt her and render her again invisible within medical discourse” (38).

²⁸ In a similar spirit, Katie Hogan has claimed that “queer theory’s systematic preoccupation with the ideological uses of ‘nature’ ... expos[es] how nature is socially imagined and constructed. In other words, scrutiny of the ‘against nature-ness’ of queers is an implicit form of queer environmentalism” (unpublished conference proposal, “Resisting Hetero-Nature”).

²⁹ Greta Gaard and Marlene Zuk, among others, have been highly critical of allowing human understandings of sexuality to dictate how we see nature – and for making animals the “poster children” of *either* straight or gay agendas. See Zuk’s *Sexual Selections* (2002).

³⁰ Discussions of the film’s organization of space abound in critical work on the film, including that of Doane, Naismith, and Davis.

³¹ Classical film form *takes visibility and visibility for granted*, in order to deploy it.

³² Naismith directly notes this reputation, and also notes the fact that the upper-class persons in *Safe* define themselves via the exclusion of “Othered” bodies. Yet her conclusion is that “in the absence of a feminist consciousness that could possibly grant them some sense of agency or power, Carol and her friends remain enclosed within the patriarchal structure of the family” (367). Since it is undeniable that the female characters in *Safe* exercise agency and power by overseeing various bodies of color and of lower class, we might ask why the “solution” would not, instead, be the presence of a feminist consciousness that would *critique* such deployments of power – the racism and classism that not only makes these women actual tiers within the patriarchal structure, but which can only work for, not against, the oppression of sexism.

³³ Bouchard and Desai have noted that “there has been no sustained investigation of the ways in which the film [*Safe* links] Carol’s illness with the privileges that come to certain subjects, specifically [in terms of] US empire” (359). This section emerges out of the same spirit, but insists that we look at how U.S. empire operates at the very mundane level of the “domestic.”

³⁴ Notably, Fulvia is not a typical Latina name; Fulvia was a wealthy Roman matron born in 77 B.C. She is perhaps best known for being married to Mark Antony and for becoming the first non-mythological woman to have her face on a Roman coin. Among other things, I believe Fulvia's name invokes the nineteenth-century practice of ironically naming slaves after prominent figures like Roman noblemen and U.S. presidents. For example, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up," the eponymous hero's slave is named Pompey – who happened to be a close associate of Mark Antony. Such an association is humiliating – Fulvia in *Safe* has nowhere near the social or economic status of her namesake – but its deployment in the film is slyly critical: Carol may believe her maid is respected and well-treated, but we know that she is still her subordinate.

Carolyn Dever has suggested to me that we might read Fulvia's name in at least one other way: as invoking fullness and plentitude. Interestingly, it is Fulvia who supplies the child-like Carol with milk – a scenario that perhaps even more closely aligns her with a female slave, or the figure of the mammy.

³⁵ I have watched this scene several times and am unsure whether this figure is Latina or white, or of mixed race. In any case, with her curly dark hair and olive skin, she does not *appear* clearly Aryan.

³⁶ Davis has noted the classically patriarchal implications of this scene, as well as how it functions within the larger structure of compulsory heterosexuality.

³⁷ Naismith claims that "the claustrophobic atmosphere of her domestic life ... seem[s] to be as much the cause of her malaise as the toxins in the air" (362).

³⁸ Naismith goes on to sketch out a comparison of Carol's treatment by her doctor and Gilman's own debilitating treatment for hysteria.

³⁹ In *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), Christian Metz explains that, as the cinema spectator is absent from the screen and thus "cannot identify with himself as an object, but only with objects which are there without him" (47), part of the watching process involves knowing "that it is I who am perceiving all this, that this perceived-imaginary material is deposited in me as if on a second screen, that it is in me that it forms up into an organized sequence, that therefore I am myself the place where this really perceived imaginary accedes to the symbolic" (49).

⁴⁰ See Davis.

⁴¹ See also note 32.

In another notable scene near the film's start, Fulvia is briefly shown in the kitchen with a caterer, another Latina woman to whom she speaks in Spanish. Fulvia seemingly takes pleasure in showing the other woman the layout of the kitchen, exercising a rare chance at control. But again, this scenario is ironic: her demonstration of familiarity is a sign of her subordinate status, her *lack* of ownership of this space.

⁴² See again Doane, Naismith, and Davis.

⁴³ Theorists such as Susan Sontag have charted the figuring of AIDS as a "gay plague" or providential consequence for sin (*AIDS and Its Metaphors* 63).

⁴⁴ Oddly enough, Manes is careful to claim that "the association between AIDS and homosexuality is purely accidental and irrelevant," but immediately continues that "in *Africa* it is a heterosexual disease, and is *destined* to be everywhere" (emphasis mine).

⁴⁵ One might wonder if the presence of persons of color at Wrenwood precludes a clear critique of whitecentrism. I would say that these bodies only further the recognition of the paternalistic, condescending attitudes of Peter Dunning and his followers – which are not unlike those of the male medical establishment. Bouchard and Desai have an interesting approach to this same question. They scrutinize Wrenwood's adoption of Eastern philosophy, and Dunning's verbal embrace of diversity, claiming that "a philosophy of bodily and psychological management is

explicitly linked to a management of the entire globe, which while owing much to racism and heteronormativity is couched in a language of ‘sensitivity’ to multiculturalism” (366). Moreover, they argue that “Asian icons of spirituality (e.g., art, meditation, and yoga) function as cultural commodities that ‘heal’ American consumption without recognizing empire” (365). Interestingly enough, this critique sounds quite similar to Murray Bookchin’s attack on deep ecology; he claims that the philosophy “has parachuted into our midst quite recently from the Sunbelt’s bizarre mix of Hollywood and Disneyland, spiced with homilies from Taoism, Buddhism, spiritualism, reborn Christianity, and in some cases eco-fascism” (3) ... What makes this Eco-la-la especially sinister today is that we are already living in a period of massive deindividuation ... the mass media, the commodity culture, and a market society are ‘reconnecting’ us into an increasingly depersonalized ‘whole’ whose essence is passivity and a chronic vulnerability to economic and political manipulation” (10).

⁴⁶ See Lauren Berlant’s “Poor Eliza,” in Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher’s *No More Separate Spheres!*

⁴⁷ See Lynne C. Einbinder and Kevin A. Schulman, “The Effect of Race on the Referral Process for Invasive Cardiac Procedures,” in *Medical Care Research and Review* 57, supplement 1 (2000) and “Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Emergency Department Care for Mild Traumatic Brain Injury” by Jeffrey J. Bazarian, et al., in *Academic Emergency Medicine* 10.11 (2003).

⁴⁸ As Scarry describes her project, “the title of the book, *The Body in Pain*, designates as the book’s subject the most contracted of spaces, the small circle of living matter; and the subtitle designates as its subject the most expansive territory, *The Making and Unmaking of the World*. But the two go together, for what is quite literally at stake in the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world” (23).

⁴⁹ See Lynn Spigel’s *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992).

⁵⁰ For a discussion of how the Western home traditionally seeks to differentiate between “inside” and “outside,” see for example Philip Crang’s 1995 article, “Displacement, Consumption, and Identity” in *Environment and Planning A* 28:1 (47-67). A great deal of scholarly and popular work has been published on how Eastern homes tend to break down this distinction in their planning. See, for example, Alison Beatty’s home design article, which claims that “Japanese architecture links the inside and outside as a continuous element” (<http://www.oldhouseweb.com/stories/Detailed/15102.shtml>).

⁵¹ Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, Christian writes, “it is precisely the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that the abject destabilizes” (107).

⁵² Buckingham-Hatfield’s *Gender and Environment* states that the work women of color “are engaged in is likely to be in the lowest-status jobs in nursing, hospital domestic work [*sic*] and hotel and catering work. These are likely to be back-room jobs where the women are least visible” (7).

⁵³ See Jane Gallop on the class implications of Freud’s inability to identify with the governess figure in her essay “Keys to Dora” (in Charles Bernheimer’s *In Dora’s Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism*).

⁵⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* presents three rather interesting definitions for the noun “domestic”: “1. A member of a household; one who dwells in the same house with another; an inmate; a member of the family (including children and relatives). 2. a. A household servant or attendant. [2.] b. A domestic animal.”

⁵⁵ Critics such as Naismith and Christian, who have noted how *Safe* often plays like a horror film (but without the expected payoffs of gruesome discoveries or other “Gotcha!” moments), have located such feelings of dread in the Wrenwood scenes and in those that find Carol navigating the spaces of her home. I believe *Safe* inculcates such feelings at other, even more subtle moments, with the effect of critique. For example, to prompt a viewer – whatever his/her racial, social, or sexual identification – to feel that a maid’s unseen-ness is a source of concern is to bring to light the way such bodies are scrutinized, policed, and monitored.

⁵⁶ In her book of the same name, the Berkeley sociologist, along with Anne Machung, noted that women in dual-career partnerships come home to a “second shift” – wherein they bear the majority of child care, housework, and

cooking responsibilities. Ironically, Hochschild's work has inspired such self-help tomes as Kathy Sherman's *A Housekeeper Is Cheaper Than a Divorce: Why You Can Afford to Hire Help and How to Get It* (2000) – a work clearly unconcerned with the prospects of a “second shift” for service workers.

⁵⁷ Buckingham-Hatfield notes that “the gendered division of labour in paid work takes place both horizontally (where different occupational sectors are associated with a particular sex) and vertically (where certain positions across sectors are held by one sex).” She cites a 1989 U.K. study that found that “95 per cent of all jobs held in the mining and quarrying sector were held by men (horizontal segregation), whilst 90 per cent of all secretarial, typing, receptionist, cashier, nursing, maid and canteen assistant jobs were held by women (vertical segregation)” (5).

⁵⁸ Databases such as Imd.com and Allmovie.com list the film as “Safe,” though searching by “[Safe]” produces the same results. That said, searching “[Harry and the Hendersons]” has the equivalent effect of bringing up the non-bracketed title of that 1987 gem.

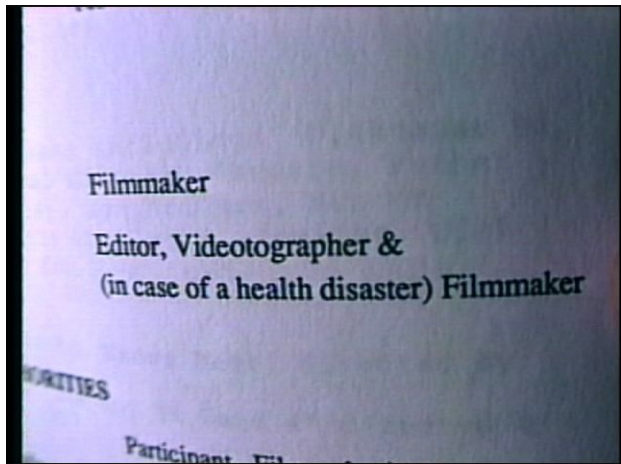
⁵⁹ In *Of Grammatology* (1974), Derrida writes of the sometimes-terrifying realization that “there is *lack* in Nature and that *because of that very fact* something *is added* to it” (149) – thus, “the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self” (163, emphasis original).

Chapter 5:

“In Case of a Health Disaster”: Testing Paternity and Posterity in *Silverlake Life*
and *Pale Fire*

Figures 7-10: *Silverlake Life*

7.



8.



9.



10.



5.



In his article, “Parasitism and *Pale Fire*’s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh,” James Ramey takes on Vladimir Nabokov’s 1962 novel, *Pale Fire*. The novel consists of a foreword by a fictional self-appointed editor, Charles Kinbote; a poem by a fictional poet, John Shade; and Kinbote’s commentary and index based on that poem – a setup that has occasioned many a critic to approach the novel in an investigative spirit, theorizing about where Kinbote may have altered or contributed to the text of the poem, making pronouncements about who the “real” author ultimately is, and attempting to make sense of the novel’s many obscure references and allusions. Ramey declares, “this essay will examine the appearance of the botfly in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, and will argue that the knowledge of the botfly’s amazing reproductive biology offers *solutions* to some of the novel’s most *resilient riddles*. The botfly can be seen as a model for Charles Kinbote’s character” (187, my emphasis) – Kinbote being, as Ramey continues,

repugnant and insidiously deceptive. Like the botfly, he is parasitic: he is economically parasitic of Wordsmith College, sexually parasitic of its young male population, socially parasitic of John Shade's reputation, and emotionally parasitic of Sybil Shade's grief.

And, like the botfly, he "reproduces" himself, in a sense, by attaching what he believes to be his life-story to an unsuspecting carrier, Shade's poem, which is much likelier to reach potential "hosts" than Kinbote's own publications would be. (189)

Whether or not Kinbote is, within the diegesis, a parasite of Shade's poem is, I argue, irrelevant. Regardless of the "intentions" of its two author-figures, Kinbote and Shade, and those of Nabokov himself, the contents of *Pale Fire* constitute a collaborative and interactive work – and they form an apparatus that *actually enacts collaboration and interaction*, sending the reader back and forth between poem and Commentary, and between Index and referent. The text deconstructs the very notion of authorship and makes improbable, if not impossible, the assignation of responsibility for any given section of the text to either Kinbote or Shade.

But I am less interested in deeming attempts at dividing up the text exercises in futility (or simply "wrong"), than in exploring the implications of such a scholarly exercise. Indeed, a great deal is revealed when we carefully examine the premise of work such as Ramey's. His insistence on solving riddles and determining true, singular Authorship – Shade's poem must be the "real" work, to which poseurs and imposers attach themselves – takes the form of (homo)phobia, and for good reason: not because Ramey himself, or the countless other critics like him,¹ are necessarily homophobic, but because the concept of authorship is, and has long been, inseparable from that of heterosexual male hegemony. Thus, once we begin the quest to determine the "real" author, we have already acquiesced to the demands of a heteronormative, patriarchal regime. In this regime, singular male creative power is paramount, collaboration is

immediately understood as contamination, and end products such as narratives or offspring are prized above anti-teleological instances such as variants or ejaculate.

One might say that Nabokov has invited such interpretive work by making Charles Kinbote both a homosexual character and a questionable author(ity). But it is how critics have seized upon these latter facts as inherently connected, first, and the ways in which they have characterized homosexuality in particular, second, that proves truly instructive. Ramey does not merely mention Kinbote's (homo)sexuality in the same breath as he refers to his (unreliable/parasitic) writing; he assumes that the latter follows from the former – and, in turn, he assumes that Kinbote's (homo)sexuality is parasitic in and of itself. This is not least of all, I would argue, because homosexuality is always understood in the post/modern imagination as sterility *and* as contamination: when we consider that alongside the novel's intertwining of writing and eroticism, it is no wonder that critics cannot view Kinbote as anything other than an intrusive parasite. Moreover, it is no wonder that Ramey cannot help but indict Kinbote's *economic* parasitism at the same time (a strange charge, after all, in that Kinbote *works* for the college he allegedly leeches off of). Kinbote's queer body, for such critics, appears to index what Michael Trask refers to as “the fluidity, the dissolute sexuality, and the class-mixing brought on by the waning of what historians call ‘producer culture’” (42). We might therefore understand this character's affront to critics and diegetic characters alike as an affront to economic productivity – and one that shows that kind of productivity to be inseparable in patriarchal culture from the biological kind. After all, queers like Kinbote, who insist upon collaboration over ownership, and interaction over posterity, are biologically “wasteful” rather than biologically “productive.” The critical inability to see Kinbote as anything other than a creative parasite, and to dissociate that form of parasitism from economic parasitism, are effects of the

cultural assumptions that both frame our readings of texts and inform our understandings of bodily vicissitudes.

This chapter examines how the contemporary concept of authorship and the form of classical realist narrative function as technologies of heteronormativity by charting two divergent responses to that functioning: that of *Pale Fire*, and that of the documentary film *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993). In looking at these texts, I show that late-twentieth-century crises in the norms of biological reproductivity and the norms of artistic creativity come together in the figure of the queer male body. As developments such as feminism, decolonization, and reproductive technology have installed themselves in Western culture over the past three decades, the queer male body has come to register the biological/cultural destabilization of the white heterosexual male, that purported bastion of individuality, solidity, and authority.² The bodily transformations represented in *Pale Fire* and *Silverlake Life* illustrate these ideological links. They show “artistic” and “genetic” authorship to be intertwined ideas – meaning that the queer body that poses a radical disturbance to the norms of one kind of authorship necessarily poses it to the other.

But rather than defensively disavowing these radical disturbances, the queer bodies depicted in my texts embrace them, thereby exploding the underpinnings and investments of the concept of authorship. As the filmmaker’s body deteriorates from AIDS – a syndrome one acquires, at least in the film’s context, through exchanges between otherwise “sterile,” i.e. non-reproductive, bodies – in the film *Silverlake Life*, the creative sovereignty of the individual subject/author is toppled; as a queer editor prepares the poetic manuscript belonging to his straight acquaintance in *Pale Fire*, new understandings of male ejaculate and its role in (re)production come into view. In both, what we are left with are unique formal experiments that

eschew classical realist narrative and the modern view of the author, and in turn find other ways to think about the body and to think about texts. What is at stake in these works, then, is the freeing of textual production from standards of normative sexual production: freeing textual production from Authorship as such, and making “deauthorization” its own kind of process, outside of the framework of “productivity.”

Separated by thirty years, *Pale Fire* and *Silverlake Life* diverge in genre, subject matter, and even tone. *Pale Fire* is a largely comic, metatextual novel set in academia, while *Silverlake Life* is a documentary that depicts a gay couple’s struggle with AIDS. But the two bear notable similarities to one another beyond those sketched out above. They show that, as the queer body intervenes in the process of reproduction, it figures the paranoias of modernity and postmodernity. In response, these texts advance models of creativity and partnership that question dominant paradigms, and exhibit postmodern form – at the same time that they burlesque the fears of a “no-authorship” world engendered by postmodern form.

An even more specific similarity emerges when we realize that both texts depict the prospect of finishing another’s work after death – giving Roland Barthes’s concept of the death of the author some literal purchase. In so doing, they unsettle the clinical and hermetic divisions erected between bodies, particularly male bodies, through historical understandings of authorship. Herein, we see the paradoxical logic of homophobia: the queer is at once sterile, and capable of “infecting” another to create something new – despite the simultaneous insistence that the queer only desires/produces the same.³ Thus, *Silverlake Life* and *Pale Fire* not only deconstruct the fantasy of the singular Author, they also offer us controversial views of disease: infectious disease, particularly in *Silverlake Life*, marks the ultimate impossibility of positioning ourselves as discrete individuals, rather than an occasion to *attempt* this positioning. Infectious

disease becomes less something to be feared than an opportunity to establish bonds with otherwise strange bodies – including, or *especially*, the dead and dying. Their common effect, then, despite their varying levels of gravitas, is pushing us to consider ethical responses to the Other outside of the framework of normative temporality: how one might insist upon caring for those whom one will never see; how we might insist upon caring for those whom we never saw or might never see again; and how interactivity in multiple dimensions, rather than retrospective self-recording, might form the basis for the (auto)biographical project.

I look first at *Silverlake Life*, examining the ways in which queer forms of authorship are bound up with the queer bodily transformation of AIDS. I then turn to *Pale Fire*, wherein no communicable disease appears – and examine how queer forms of authorship *take on the threat* of communicable disease. The order of this pairing illuminates several things. First, while AIDS occasioned particular textual responses in the 1990s, the fears those responses addressed are not unique to that time period; AIDS, we might argue, became a scrutinized site for making sense of the senseless queer body – for coalescing and/or vilifying its directionless, ambivalent, and anti-narrative impulses. Whereas concerns about paternity and posterity attach themselves to the AIDS-afflicted body in *Silverlake Life*, pathology (particularly, insanity and obsessive homosexual desire) forms an aura around the body of one who cares little about paternity, posterity, and creative individualism in *Pale Fire*. In fact, considering *Pale Fire* after *Silverlake Life* allows us to see that the former text, which is most often considered modernist, and frequently “defended” as apolitical, actually engages in what we now recognize as postmodern debates about the dissolution of the stable sex-gender-desire complex. More specifically, considering *Pale Fire* after *Silverlake Life* allows us to see that *even a wholly fictional text* raises deep cultural concerns about collaboration and contamination, queerness and communal

creation; beyond considering how both texts refer to a dominant culture with heteronormative expectations for authorship, I look – as I have done briefly above with *Pale Fire* – at how public reactions to both encode these expectations. In thus placing together an obviously-queer text (*Silverlake Life*) with one often vehemently denied to be queer (*Pale Fire*),⁴ I sketch out the emergence of a critique of authorship as it is understood through heteronormativity – one that might be less recognizable when we treat these texts separately, or when we assume that the more recent text offers us the most “developed” instance of this critique.

Authorship under Fire

Authorship is neither a transhistorical concept nor a stable one. Prominent accounts of authorship in modernity and postmodernity track how, under capitalism, technology eventually replaces production with replication and generates simulacra – duplicates with no clear antecedent. As Walter Benjamin argues in his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that ... permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public” (219). While technical reproduction coincided with the goals of mass movements, creating the new possibility that art could take on political work, it also eroded tradition. As Benjamin elaborates,

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction ... What is really jeopardized ... is the authority of the object. (221)

These problems of authority (which are, of course, problems of authorship) are exacerbated in

postmodernity's "hypercapitalism," per Jean Baudrillard, as replication triumphs over production:⁵

We are dealing with third-order simulacra here. There is no more counterfeiting of an original, as there was in the first order, and no more pure series as there were in the second; there are models from which all forms proceed according to modulated differences. Only affiliation to the model has any meaning, since *nothing proceeds in accordance to its end any more* ... We are at the limits of an ever more forceful extermination of references and *finalities*, of a loss of *semblances* and designators. (56, my emphasis)

In "The Death of the Author" (1977), Roland Barthes notes efforts to deconstruct the ideology of authorship, while simultaneously outlining the continuing sway of that ideology even under such conditions:

The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the "human person." It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the "person" of the author. (141-2)

In what might be called a companion piece to "The Death of the Author," "What is an Author?" (1977), Michel Foucault argues that, while "literary works [in contemporary times] are totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author" (126), this sovereignty has yet to be fully theorized. Thus, authorship seems like a natural fact, rather than an active process of assignation. As he argues,

The author-function ... is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author. Undoubtedly, this construction is assigned a “realistic” dimension as we speak of an individual’s “profundity” or “creative” power, his intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing. ... These aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author ... are projections ... of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, in the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. (127)

Like Barthes’s, Foucault’s essay argues both that our contemporary times are marked by an insistence on the unproblematized author, and that this figure is on the verge of crumbling. (The conclusion of “What is an Author?”, in fact, tenders the prospect of a world wherein texts will once again circulate without attribution.) Barthes and Foucault, in short, indicate that the late modernist/postmodern deconstruction of the author constitutes a crisis of control over cultural production.

But the late modernist/postmodernist crisis of authorial control is also a crisis of sexuality – of sexual reproduction in particular. In fact, as Trask has shown, early twentieth-century theorists of society argued that modernity itself perverts normative human sexuality: “modernity’s diversifying function, its habit of breaking things down into ever more discrete components, is what induces the culture-wide amnesia of sex’s ‘natural aim’ in favor of ‘artificial enjoyment.’ The diffusiveness of modern society morphs into the indeterminate licentiousness of excessive and ill-placed desire” (34). So what, then, are the implications of perverting authorship in the face of such already-widespread perversion? What are the implications of seeking to detach it from normative cultural-sexual standards? We might begin

by briefly considering Jeffrey Masten's claim that

in a way that has not been fully recognized or conceptualized by scholars trained to organize material within post-Enlightenment paradigms of individuality, authorship, and textual property, collaboration was a prevalent mode of textual production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only eventually displaced by the mode of singular authorship with which we are more familiar. (4)

While Masten's field of inquiry is the Renaissance, his careful surveying of a "pre-authorship" period reveals some implicit facts about contemporary Western culture: that the use of an author's name is an outcome of a particular ideology, and that creative genius is believed to be a phenomenon of singularity. Masten insists "upon relating the material conditions and cultural representations of sex/gender and of textual production," with the "chiastic assumption ... that texts are produced within a particular sex/gender context and that gender and sexuality are themselves in part produced in and by texts" (5). Looking at *Silverlake Life*, which emerges from the sex/gender context of the early 1990s AIDS crisis, and *Pale Fire*, which emerges from the sex/gender context of the early 1960s Cold War era, I argue that these works reveal anxieties around the connection between sex/gender and textual production that are unique to those times, even as they connect to one another. Whereas Masten shows that the texts he considers existed as texts in their own right before the era of authorship, I show that these two accounts of queer bodily change exist as texts in an era of crisis for authorship – texts that exist on the limit-horizon of authorship as a viable hermeneutic for securing cultural meaning and stabilizing human bodies.

We might also note Masten's comment on "the inextricability of the question of authorship from patriarchy's interest in the identity of the father" (13). Poststructuralist feminist

theorists have approached this relationship in discursive terms, noting the phallogentrism of discourses such as psychoanalysis, and how descriptions of the human entrance into language and, thus representation, leave women unrepresentable, and unspeaking/unspeakable. In response, such theorists have asked us to imagine, as does Luce Irigaray, what might happen if “woman were to reopen paths into (once again) a/one logos that connotes her as castrated, especially as castrated of words” (142). For Irigaray, male domination is secured by “identify[ing] with the law-giving father, with his proper names, his desires for making capital, in every sense of the word, desires that prefer the possession of territory, which includes language, to the exercise of his pleasures, with the exception of his pleasure in trading women” (140). To not append “proper names” to writing would thus constitute a refusal to “mak[e] capital” – and a self-consciously ignored opportunity, within a system under the “law-giving” father, to further exclude the female.

But beyond its ramifications for an unequal *sex/gender* system, perverting the normal course of authorship has *biological* ramifications that are also cultural and political; “the identity of the father” is no less powerful when it denotes not (just) discursive/linguistic dominance, but, simply, the dominion of he who procreates. Consider Hortense Spillers’s observation that “in certain human societies, a child’s identity is determined through the line of the Mother, but the United States ... is not one of them.” Quoting Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, she shows how this fact has been used to justify white supremacy: “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the *rest of American society*, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole” (65, emphasis Spillers). Just as developmentalism’s application to adolescents, and to the human body at large, has a particular racial history (see Chapters 2 and

3), so does this racist claim depend upon a progressivist developmental schema. But it also re-entrenches white-centric, patriarchal norms: “‘motherhood’ is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance” (Spillers 80). Spillers goes on to summarize how this fact organizes property, production, and ownership, and defines “enlightened” societies:

Because the traditional rites and laws of inheritance rarely pertain to the female child, bastard status signals to those who need to know which son of the Father’s is the legitimate heir and which one the imposter. For that reason, property seems wholly the business of the male. (65) ... “Family,” as we practice and understand it “in the West” – the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of “cold cash,” from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and female of *his* choice – becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community. (74, emphasis original)

We might read Spillers’s notion of “cultural inheritance” as including textual production: in *Silverlake Life* and *Pale Fire*, the queering of textual production destabilizes patriarchy – even when those persons involved are white males who circulate in realms largely devoid of women.

Silverlake Life: The View from Here

Silverlake Life began as the project of Tom Joslin, a Los Angeles-based documentary filmmaker who set out to depict his and his partner Mark Massi’s struggle with AIDS. In its completed form, the bulk of the film’s running time consists of video diary footage shot by Joslin and, less frequently, Massi. This footage – which depicts such everyday activities as grocery shopping and swimming, alongside equally mundane, though more fraught, activities such as going to the doctor – is frequently addressed to the viewer, and often foregrounds its own

conditions of production. Its mode can thus be described as “reflexive;” as outlined by film theorist Bill Nichols, “the reflexive mode of [documentary] representation gives emphasis to the encounter between filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject” (the latter two of which are, of course, collapsed into one another in *Silverlake Life*). The reflexive mode, Nichols continues, is

the most doubtful about the possibilities of communication and expression that the other modes take for granted. Realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable argument ... all these notions prove suspect. ... [T]he reflexive documentary prompts the viewer to a heightened consciousness of his or her relation to the text and the text’s problematic relationship to that which it represents. (60)

The remainder of the film consists of footage shot by friend and fellow documentary filmmaker Peter Friedman.⁶ This footage divides up into two categories: that shot by Friedman after Joslin’s death, while Massi was still alive; and that shot by Friedman after both were dead – the latter of which metatextually depicts efforts to finish the film. While its metatextuality marks this footage as reflexive in part, it also takes up expository and observational documentary techniques such as the use of voiceover, a tendency toward classical form, and the minimization of the filmmaker’s appearance. As Nichols explains, “the expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated judgment” (35); observational documentary, which tends to produce “strongly narrative-structured films” (13), “conveys the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world. The physical body of a particular filmmaker does not seem to put a limit on what we can see” (43).

Silverlake Life was released at the height of “New Queer Cinema,” the new wave in

which several independent films began garnering notice for their “homo pomo”⁷ style; *Silverlake Life* won the Grand Jury prize at Sundance in 1993, in addition to collecting numerous international prizes. As Michele Aaron explains, “the lack of respect for the governing codes of form or content, linearity or coherence [in New Queer Cinema films] ... has much in common with postmodernism.” The other aspect these films share is that they “in many ways defy death” (5), a crucial move insofar as the raging AIDS crisis of that era, and the phobic discourse surrounding it, both associated homosexuality with death and equated an AIDS diagnosis with a death sentence. Elaborating on this point, Monica B. Pearl contends that “New Queer Cinema is AIDS cinema: not only because the films ... emerge out of the time of and the preoccupations with AIDS, but because their narratives and also their formal discontinuities, are AIDS-related” (23). AIDS becomes not just a topic or object of representation, but the occasion for rethinking normative paradigms of time and value – in short, what life trajectories are supposed to look like – and for doing so through filmic strategies. While, as a documentary, *Silverlake Life* is relatively unique among New Queer Cinema films, the continuum of film-viewing habits means that it can, nonetheless, comment on classical narrative cinema. As Nichols reflects,

What are the assumptions and expectations that characterize the viewing of a documentary? To the extent that they can be generalized, they will be the product of previous experience rather than predispositions conjured on the spot. Their latent presence is what a narrative fiction film can capitalize upon and what a documentary will modify within limits but also reinforce as a basically correct form of punctuation within the domain of the cinema at large. (24)

Silverlake Life corresponds in large part to both Aaron’s and Pearl’s descriptions of New Queer Cinema. As Susanna Egan notes, it “resist[s] linear narrative, using unexplained voices off

camera, including apparently random, decontextualized people and activities, defying all but the loosest possibilities of narrative,” and creating a “spatial rather than a linear concept of subjective experience” (606-7). Its main form, that of the video diary, works against the classical narrativity that inheres even in the most “truthful” of documentaries:⁸ the diary has no narrative telos, no obligation to reveal anything in particular, no ending that can be preplanned so as to lend retrospective significance to its bulk theretofore. As Ross Chambers has claimed, its only “job” is to keep going, day after day, until it ends in a manner largely conditional and incidental.⁹ Finally, its very unfolding is conditional: as Egan argues, “with handheld cameras, or with the camera attached to the interior of a moving car and swinging through random shots, [Joslin] suggest[s] a contingency in the very filming that dissociates even the autobiographer himself from any controlling vision” (607).

More than evincing postmodern, anti-classical tendencies, *Silverlake Life*'s main form and content appear to be AIDS-related on the most immediate of levels. The AIDS diagnosis of its primary filmmaker, Joslin, and his partner Massi, occasioned the video diary tapes from which the film was ultimately fashioned by Friedman – and, of course, Friedman had to do so because both Joslin and Massi passed away during filmmaking. But I want to go further than Pearl's proclamation that “New Queer Cinema is AIDS cinema,” to argue that broader issues are at stake in *Silverlake Life*'s narrative innovations, and in its unique authorial status. While, certainly, AIDS was the most talked-about issue around queer bodies in the 1990s, I argue that AIDS discourse is also bound up with the authorial issues I have surveyed. We might say that AIDS *gathered together* fears about the replicative abilities of queer bodies, their (perceived) lack of individuality and hermeticism, and their (presumed) sterility – fears that *Silverlake Life* works through in unique and often contradictory ways. I am convinced by the argument that

AIDS diaries' replacement of "the narrative syntax of beginning, middle, and end" with "the structure of chronicle, with its greater immediacy: a simple *taxis* (arrangement) of now this, now that" emerges out of "respect for the dailiness to which the severely ill are condemned" (Chambers 6-7). But I maintain that *Silverlake Life*'s form speaks to much more than the concerns of "the severely ill" – i.e., people with AIDS. The film works against the narrative expectations imposed on all bodies – causality, which seeks to make sense of queer bodily changes, and forward momentum, which is assumed to lead to both heterosexual reproductive maturity, and to death. And it resists how those values attach to the hegemonic expectations around authorship. On *Silverlake Life*'s account, then, the queer bodily experiences of AIDS necessitate different narrative form, and a different approach to the production of texts.

Contingent Parenthood

Critical work on *Silverlake Life* often takes its constitution to be the video diary footage shot by Joslin and Massi. But, as I have indicated, the film is actually a hybrid; when we take Friedman's contributions into consideration, we recognize not only that *Silverlake Life* employs multiple documentary modes, but that it contains biographical as well as autobiographical footage, and that it spans two temporal registers.¹⁰ Later, I will discuss the ideological tensions produced by *Silverlake Life*'s generic hybridity. But first, I will discuss how its hybridity invokes the fraught issues of origins and authorship. These issues are raised within the film's first few minutes, which confuse us as to who is making the film (and which also establish the expository/observational style that the greater part of the film will counter). The first shot opens on the figure of Mark Massi sleeping on a couch, then pans to a TV in the room. The film then cuts to another shot of a TV, showing a videotape of Massi sitting next to Joslin. Next, we see Massi talking to an unseen interviewer off camera, followed by explicitly point-of-view shots

from the hand-held camera operator: a hand touches a doorknob, then we see into a room filled with film and video equipment. A voice-over, presumably emanating from this interviewer/camera operator, then intones, “Tom Joslin was my film teacher back in college ... When [his partner Massi] and he were both diagnosed with AIDS, Tom decided to begin shooting a video diary ... He asked me to finish it if he couldn’t.” The next shot indicates to us that the interviewer/voice-over speaker is Peter Friedman: we see a typed shooting guide that identifies Joslin as “Filmmaker” and Friedman as “Editor, Videographer & (in case of a health disaster) Filmmaker” (see figure 1). The voiceover and the script list spell out a queer paternity that makes for ontological hybridity: Joslin does not (just) exhort Friedman to finish *Joslin’s* work, but asks that the work become *Friedman’s* as well. Friedman receives a title not based on “ultimate” or “pure” authorship, but on contingency. In short, while Joslin cares deeply about the film’s posterity – though in particularly queer ways, as we will see – he cares much less about its paternity, perceived or “actual.”

Here, disease and the imminent death it heralds are not cause for asserting control, but an occasion for the diffusion of authority and a confounding of strict genealogical lines. First, not only does Massi become co-filmmaker during and after Joslin’s last days, taking over the camera and narrating duties, but *Silverlake Life* lists both Joslin and Friedman as the directors.¹¹ This queer genealogy confounds the myth of the singular author,¹² which has a unique purchase in the context of film. Peter Wollen describes the “*auteur* [French for ‘author’] theory,” which was developed by a group of critics associated with the film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1960s¹³: “the *auteur theory* does not limit itself to acclaiming the director as the main author of a film. It implies an operation of decipherment; it reveals authors where none had been seen before” (77).

This “revelation” is thus an ideological solution to an epistemological problem: how to account for a text’s existence. It insists, in a near-paranoid manner, on such values as singularity/non-dependence, identifiability/manifestness, and non-contamination/definitive boundaries. In film as in literature, Wollen indicates, authorship is ideally a singular prospect; an author should be identifiable through his text and vice versa, and any outside influences or contributions should be cordoned off from the body of the text by whatever means available. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith sums up, “the purpose of criticism thus becomes to *uncover behind* the ... subject and treatment a *hard core* of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs ... is what gives an author’s work its particular structure, both defining it internally and *distinguishing one body of work from another*” (as quoted in Wollen 80, my emphasis). Even if working with previously-published source material, Wollen summarizes, “the director does not *subordinate himself* to another author; his source is only a pretext, which provides catalysts, scenes which fuse with his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work” (113, my emphasis). Auteur theory has no room for films that are a one-off prospect, and thus do not allow for a pattern that can be identified – films, in short, such as *Silverlake Life*. More pointedly, regardless of the intentions of its proponents, auteur theory echoes cultural imperatives about the identifiability of “the father,” the sanctity of the individual (male?) author, and the sanctity of that author’s body (of work?).

Beverly Seckinger and Janet Jakobsen argue that “the resulting collaborative authorship of [*Silverlake Life*] echoes what Thomas Waugh has argued has been a persistent characteristic of gay documentary since the 1970s” (146). They conclude that “the film works to counter the frequently unequal relationship between documentary producer and subject” (150), and that the “the collaboration ... invokes a long-standing approach to activist filmmaking as a collective

struggle” (146). But I argue that we must not lose sight of the specific queerness of that collaboration, and what it stands to do vis-à-vis normative standards of (re)production. Indeed, the ways in which *Silverlake Life* confounds the myth of the singular author carries a specific threat to *patriarchal heteronormativity*, not just film culture or conservative culture at large. The film’s “loose” approach to artistic production bears no interest in tracing lineage or controlling futurity; it shows that “inextricability of the question of authorship from patriarchy’s interest in the identity of the father,” to quote Masten, as well as the possibility of textual production free from that interest.

David Ehrenstein’s 1993 interview with Friedman in the *Los Angeles Times*, in which Friedman recounts *Life*’s rejections from film festivals, gestures toward these very facts; it juxtaposes, whether intentionally or not, generally (homo)phobic responses with those that insist upon single authorship. Ehrenstein notes, first, that “the manager of a New York theater known for showcasing independent films told Friedman that the film would repel audiences;” he goes on to state, “[and] then there was the major film festival that turned down *Silverlake Life*.” Friedman elaborates, “that was the strangest reaction I’ve had so far ... I was told it was a ‘director-driven’ festival, and since the film lacked a clear ‘author’ it didn’t qualify.” This reaction is not “strange” if one believes, say, that “there is no doubt that the greatest films will be not simply *auteur* films but marvelous expressively and stylistically as well” (Wollen 113). And it is not “strange” at all from the perspective of a heteronormative capitalist culture that banks on clear genealogy and posterity, and which believes that texts should be attributed to single individuals. In fact, while Friedman tells Ehrenstein that the film confronts two major social fears, fear of death, and fear of homosexuality, it seems it invokes a *specific* fear around homosexuality: that it represents the weakening of the reproductive nuclear family, the bedrock of claims to clear

genealogy and posterity. To be redeemed, the homosexual would have to disavow the creation of alternative models of creativity and posterity. But Friedman declines the option of auteurism, foregrounding the contingency of his co-authorship within the film and in public interactions.

Friedman's and Joslin's co-authorship is intergenerational in two ways. First, while the two are set up as collaborators, they work on the same film in completely different temporal dimensions – Joslin during his own life, and Friedman after Joslin's death. This dynamic disturbs the kind of temporality that accrues to the author in modern conceptions, and which structures bodies/lives in dominant culture: as Barthes claims, "the Author ... is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book ... he exists before it ... suffers, lives for it, in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (144). It is no coincidence that Barthes calls this the "*same* relation of antecedence:" paternity is conceptually intertwined with property and ownership (two of the concepts that Foucault identifies as having inaugurated the post-anonymity textual world in "What is an Author?"). To thus give up "nourishing" a work, and to cease to exist before *it* fully does – as Joslin does – shows a lack of care for the mutually reinforcing temporal norms of creativity and biology.

Friedman is also from a younger generation of gay men, *and* one of Joslin's former students. These facts invoke the notion of a queer (social/professional) reproduction that stands outside of heteronormative (biological) reproduction. Friedman tells Ehrenstein,

I know people always say that they had one teacher in their life that really affected them. For me, that person was Tom. He was the first openly gay person I ever met. I was midway through the semester, and Tom had never mentioned anything about his being gay. Then one day he invited me to see his film *Blackstar* ... I was 18 years old and very

closeted ... There was Tom, up on screen being very open – coming out to his whole family. There was even a scene of him in bed with Mark.

Friedman's introduction to/induction into queer life is highly pedagogical in nature, with Joslin combining the role of gay "father figure" with that of an actual teacher. But perhaps more interesting, this introduction/induction is filmic in nature. Joslin transmits to Friedman images of queer openness and sexuality that Friedman has been unable to imagine on his own. In turn, Friedman becomes a custodian to the next filmic object Joslin produces, meanwhile queering what might otherwise look like a metaphor for normative parenthood. That is, while it makes sense for Friedman to care for his antecedents as a "son" of Joslin, he is actually now "co-parenting" with the older man, leveling the hierarchies of old/young, predecessor/product in order to install a kind of horizontal, rather than vertical, lineage. *Silverlake Life's* complex genealogy thus both enacts, and emerges from, queer reproductive possibilities.

The inclusion of Joslin's family in the film demonstrates the threats that such possibilities pose. *Life* includes interviews with Joslin's mother and father, excerpted from Joslin's 1977 documentary, *Blackstar: Autobiography of Close Friend*, in which they position "the normal" as the heterosexual reproductive family, and voice varying degrees of denial and disgust about Joslin's deviance. His father declares, "I don't think you ought to advertise [homosexuality.] ... It doesn't seem quite normal. To us. The normal people." His mother, more gently, remarks, "family life has always meant so much, and to think that you would not have a family of your own was a great disappointment to me." One could make the argument that, in the 1970s, to be gay and have "a family" – to be partnered and adopt a child, for example, or to employ reproductive technologies – was unheard of, thus prompting Joslin's mother's statement. But the fact remains that "gay," as it appears from the dominant perspective within the 1993 film, stands

explicitly against “family;” the two terms are mutually exclusive. While Massi and Joslin may consider themselves “family,” as they stress throughout the film, that sentiment does not fully dislodge the definition tendered by Joslin’s parents, which is premised upon heterosexual biological reproduction. Such hegemonic definitions, it should be noted, oscillate between the literal/biological and the discursive/formal. That is, his mother’s notion of queer sterility means much more than, say, “queers cannot biologically reproduce” (the literal/biological level); it also means that “queers are unfit to reproduce dominant cultural values” (the discursive/formal level). *Silverlake Life*’s radical queer response is to address both of these levels, without acceding to the standards of the hegemonic definition.

The film’s treatment of AIDS also confounds (hetero)normative genealogical patterns. We might say, in fact, that the syndrome does more than occasion the urgency of the response that is *Silverlake Life*; AIDS occasions the film’s particular vocabulary, as well as its structure.¹⁴ For example, early on, Massi states, “we finally made the decision to get our tests done – which was about six years ago. And ... I went in and it came out positive ... [You start] looking for KS spots or lesions, or some sign that the disease is finally really here.” Mark’s statement obscures the issue of whether or not Joslin’s test came out positive at the same time; all we know from it is that they were *tested* simultaneously. But Friedman did tell us early on that “when they were both diagnosed with AIDS, Tom decided to begin shooting a video diary.” In locating the genesis of the film around the men’s AIDS diagnoses, Friedman figures that experience as simultaneous, and makes that simultaneity more important than any temporal succession that may have technically existed. Moreover, the film obscures the issue of HIV in multiple ways: at first listen, it is unclear if Massi is talking about being tested for AIDS, or for HIV (an issue I will discuss below in greater detail); Friedman sidesteps any discussion of HIV diagnosis in

favor of concentrating on *AIDS* diagnosis; and none of the discussions captured in the film reference HIV infection or sexual history. The film renders moot the issue of who infected whom; in short, how we got here, and who is responsible, are no longer relevant questions.¹⁵

Massi's comments, interestingly, also confuse the difference between HIV and AIDS. Considering that he is talking about six years prior, the testing he refers to must be for HIV, not AIDS. (Technically, there is no "AIDS test" as such. And, interestingly, "HIV tests" do not check for the presence of HIV itself, but rather the antibodies that fight it. The presence of the casual agent, that is, cannot be directly determined.) But HIV never gets mentioned; only AIDS is invoked through the reference to KS lesions. This confusion, along with the refusal to talk about infection itself, are major ideological turns in a depiction of a disease that society wants to believe is predictable in inheritance and import: HIV causes AIDS, which causes death. And, from a more homophobic stance, homosexuals get and give each other HIV – thus, homosexuality leads to death. While it was, for many years, something of a dismal truth that gay men were dying in disproportionately high numbers very soon after HIV diagnosis, the causal logic employed by the dominant culture rendered homosexuality equivalent to death – either murder (infecting another) or suicide (becoming infected by another through consensual sexual contact). But *Silverlake Life* does more than obscure the relationship between HIV and AIDS, and between infector and infectee; it also points to the ways that those "afflicted" are prompted to conceive of their experience as a teleological one, and to take medical diagnoses as the "truth" that their bodies will then visually corroborate – after diagnosis, "[you start] looking for KS spots or lesions, or some sign that the disease is finally really here." Through all of these moves, *Silverlake Life* dissects beliefs about the queer subject's inevitable death *even as* it depicts the death of its homosexual protagonists.

One might say that all of these particulars make *Silverlake Life*, to a large degree, dangerous. It obscures the facts about HIV infection and AIDS at a moment when ignorance and apathy were at an all-time high.¹⁶ Seckinger and Jakobsen also worry that “the refusal to accede to the dominant culture’s obsession with mode of transmission ... seems to contribute to a certain absence of sexuality in the film as a whole” (153). *Silverlake Life* does indeed downplay sex, just as it is fair to venture that the film might not work as a “public service” text. But its confusions of the HIV-AIDS relationship, its obfuscation of the means of transmission, and its somewhat skeptical, simplistic parroting of the developmental arc of AIDS – you get diagnosed, you see signs of illness, you die – are not without critical force. The film refuses to make rational the irrational experience of illness; it works against the phobic, paranoid logic of heteronormativity and paternity – *someone* must be to blame; an ultimate source *has* to be found; a Patient Zero *must* exist¹⁷ – and thus allows AIDS to mirror the film’s own status as a text that “lack[s] a ‘clear’ author.” It is not that *Silverlake Life* suggests there is no one who *could* be blamed, or that causality as such does not exist. But, as does Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding*, this text does not interpret the body through normative causal schemas; the “effects” that appear in or on a body are divorced from the “causes” dominant society would assign to them – or from any causes at all. And, more specifically, by showing no interest in locating a source, an ontological origin, *Silverlake Life* troubles the idea of the Author/Source as the site of meaning (whether – positive or negative). While “knowing” which of the two partners was “to blame” might mean a great deal for the viewer accustomed to the normative workings of cinematic (dis)identification, *not* “knowing” positions us quite differently. In approaching these figures, as in approaching the film – made up, as it is, of multiple instances that may or may not have been edited by Friedman¹⁸ – we have no ultimate certainty about causes, origins, sources.

Put another way, the film's form actually mirrors the alternative approaches to the body it tenders. And we might ask, after all, what good does "knowing" the cause, origin, or source of illness do for the dying?

While this particular instance of withholding – indeed, discounting – definitive knowledge does not constitute the central thrust of the film, it is worth pausing to consider the ways in which it works against the assumptions inherent to documentary filmmaking. As Nichols explains, a

basic expectation held by the documentary viewer [is] that the desire to know will find gratification during the course of the film. ... [D]ocumentary convention spawns an epistephelia. It posits an organizing agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it. He-who-knows (the agency is usually masculine) will share that knowledge with those who wish to know. (31)

Having refused from the start the agential masculine position of all-encompassing control, the video diary footage of *Silverlake Life*, in turn, treats its viewers in a similar manner. It refuses to offer us total "information and knowledge" about the experience of AIDS, or to position itself as the definitive document on the subject – not least because it is never "finished," from Joslin's and Massi's perspectives, but always unfolding. Instead, it offers us partial knowledges, fleeting glimpses, contingent and individual interactions.

Life's queer ideological turns form a counteroffensive to the clinical discourse around AIDS, which establishes a normative narrative structure and temporal schema for the syndrome and the bodies affected by it. That is, while theorists such as Monica Pearl believe that AIDS is inherently a postmodern illness, *Life* indicates that dominant culture has actually attempted to make (homophobic) sense of it – to develop a cause-and-effect schema that places blame (on

behaviors, and on homosexuality in particular), and to inculcate an atmosphere of paranoia (one that encourages the clear identification and ostracizing of potential enemies). Thus, it is an ironic victory that AIDS emerges through the film as a challenge to the traditional project of clearly delimiting origins. Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors* outlines the history of clinical discourse around the syndrome, noting that "what is called AIDS [or was in 1988 as she was writing, near the time filming on *Silverlake Life* began] is generally understood as the last of three stages – the first of which is infection with a ... virus (HIV) ... with a long latency period between infection and the onset of the 'telltale' symptoms." She contrasts cancer, "first of all a disease of the body's geography," to AIDS, "whose definition depends on constructing a temporal sequence of stages" (109-10).¹⁹ Sontag calls this tripartite developmental sequence a "primitively metaphorical" notion. But this notion continues, tenaciously, to structure bodies both sick and well – making it nothing if not contemporaneous, and nothing if not familiar. As I have shown in previous chapters, the notion that our bodily processes are linear and teleological allows us to make retroactive sense of previous stages. This is the same thinking that inheres in classical narrative form: we are encouraged to believe, and then retrospectively affirm, that all events leading toward a particular ending are necessary, meaningful, and causal. As Sontag elaborates,

The contention that AIDS is invariably fatal depends partly on what doctors decided to define as AIDS – and keep in reserve as distinct earlier stages of the disease. ... 'Full-blown' is the form in which the disease is invariably fatal. As what is immature is destined to become mature, what buds to become full-blown (fledglings to become full-fledged) – the doctors' ... metaphor makes development or evolution into AIDS the norm, the rule. (117, my emphasis)

We thus see another dimension of *Silverlake Life*'s queering of paternity: it shows that the predictable trajectories of developmentalism – those that guide classical narrative form – inhere in conceptions of disease. As *The Member of the Wedding* does with puberty, so *Silverlake Life* does with AIDS: it shows supposedly natural developmental stages to be constructions, though ones deeply entrenched in the public imagination. (Indeed, the notions of blooming and maturity referenced by Sontag directly echo the “inevitable” liminality we saw critiqued in Chapters 2 and 3, with the adolescent body and the trans body.) And there, the film intervenes: the beginning-middle-end schema that AIDS seems to ratify – diagnosis-disease-death – is directly countered by *Silverlake Life*'s insistence upon, instead, lateral relationships and strange genealogies.

Of course, imminent death, that which occasioned *Silverlake Life*, may seem to be the ultimate teleology. But the film refuses that teleology in multiple ways. First, its causal/temporal confusions make clear that AIDS exists *in the realm of discourse*, not just as an “actual” biological phenomenon. As Peggy Phelan avers, “our emphasis on causality in relation to AIDS is itself ‘a symptom’” (159) – as much, as, say, weight loss or thrush. Neither Phelan's statement nor my argument intend to disregard medical knowledge. Rather, they mean to point out that the disease is constructed as much through ideology as through medical knowledge. Homophobic, heteronormative, reproductive logic constructed AIDS in the 1980s and early 1990s not just as a “gay disease,” but as one to be confronted or even prevented through the rationalism of clinical scrutiny and the logic of paternity. But *Silverlake Life*, instead, flagrantly displays a queer ethics of infection and of multiple “parents.” The fantasy of queer sterility on which heteroreproductivity is premised cannot stand up here, but nor is the charge of queer contamination met with concern. By not dividing or quarantining bodies, be they authorial

bodies, or “real” AIDS bodies, or bodies of work, *Silverlake Life* interrogates the common wisdom that contamination and collaboration are, by definition, bad – or, equal to one another in a solely destructive rather than (re)productive way.

Queering Posterity

Though privately experienced, the crisis of AIDS, and the connection between lovers, become public through *Silverlake Life*'s medium of videotape-and-film. Lawrence R. Schehr has observed the “generalizing function that happens through the publication of most ... [AIDS] narratives” (747), while Ross Chambers discusses, more specifically, how *Silverlake Life* inculcates receptivity within a “homophobic and indifferent majority” (21): as he explains,

Showing, as the ... video ... understands it, draws its rhetorical power, the power to convert the phobic look, less from a simple faith in visibility – the visibility of coming out and of ‘Blatant is beautiful’ – than from a pedagogy that entails a longer and more difficult process: that of learning to confront, and to see, disease, suffering, and death.

(64)

This ethics of dispersal, and *Silverlake Life*'s related invocation of an indeterminate audience, are the main tactics through which the film queers posterity – and, thus, the way we insist upon reproduction as a response to the body's decay.

About 30 minutes into *Silverlake Life*, Tom Joslin and Mark Massi share a kiss. Turning to the camera, Massi says, “Now *there*'s a goodnight kiss, huh? I bet *you* people don't get those.” This at-once playful and aggressive comment is difficult to parse. Who does “*you* people” indicate? Considering that the kissers are a same-sex pair, we might assume straight people. But the comment is rather emphatic; it might be, more specifically, homophobic people. Or, considering that the two have AIDS, it might be anyone who *doesn't* have AIDS. Yet again,

considering the demonstrativeness of the gesture, and the fact that AIDS was once widely believed to be spread by kissing, and in fact still is by some,²⁰ it might be anyone who fears those with AIDS, gay or straight. That any and all of these are possible answers speaks to an important point: *Silverlake Life* queers posterity through rhetoric as well as form. It does not presume an interested audience, but nor does it stake itself on the conversion of a resistant one. It allows for both interest and resistance – for the viewer who may be arrested by the phrase “you people,” as well as those whose disgust marks them as “you people” *in the first place*. And perhaps more importantly, *Life* does not clarify on what grounds a viewer’s interest or resistance would be premised. Unlike classical realist cinema, then, *Silverlake Life* does not interpellate its spectators as heterosexual; it interpellates them much more ambivalently, as respondents charged with whatever they might take “you people” to mean. In turn, we might say, the film challenges viewers to somehow close the gap installed by that distancing, alienating “you.”²¹ *Silverlake Life* thus refigures disease itself – so often associated with destruction, and, in the case of AIDS, so closely connected to queer sterility and death – as a model of queer productivity and ethical cross-temporal relations.

In “Limited Obligations to Future Generations,” which centers on environmental sustainability practices, Martin Golding argues, “what is distinctive about the notion of obligations to future generations is ... that it refers to generations with which the possessors of the obligations cannot expect in a literal sense to share a common life” – meaning, “immediate descendants” (331). *Silverlake Life* clearly possesses such a commitment: Joslin and Massi’s legacy is bequeathed to virtual strangers, and the two will have no control over its dispersal or reception – not least of all because they will no longer be living at that point. While no artist knows exactly whom her work will reach, the ways in which homosexual sex is connected with

death in the public imagination means that the film's self-consciousness of something like Golding's model of caring for those in the distant future – without necessarily caring *who they are* (gay or straight, HIV positive or negative, and so forth) – has significant weight. It creates the kind of asymmetrical, ever-regenerating relationship to the Other that Levinas considers the very definition of ethics²² – rather than an obligation to the Child whom, as Lee Edelman has described, forms the ideological basis in our culture for future-oriented actions.²³

But *Silverlake Life's* version of ethics also inverts the structure of obligation that Golding describes. Not only does it “work” for unidentified and unidentifiable viewers far in the future (those “people” they refer to), it works, retroactively, for those who no longer exist, but once did. As Massi says, while we look at Joslin's emaciated corpse lying in bed, “All of your friends will finish the tape for you, okay? We promise.” This promise extends, in the other direction, Golding's statement that “the moral relation between us and future generations is one in which they have a claim against us to promote their good. Future generations are, thus, possessors of presumptive rights.” Golding admits that the latter conclusion “is surely odd. How can future generations – the not-yet-born – *now* have claims against us?” (332). And the inverse question, prompted by *Life*, is surely just as odd, if not more so: How can past individuals, the already-dead, *now* obligate others to them? How can Tom, after his death, “possess rights”? Of course, Tom Joslin's lover and his friends have a direct connection to Tom; we might understand their obligations quite well. But I argue that *we as viewers* – persons unrelated to and unseen by Tom Joslin, and temporally/ontologically removed from him – are obligated to this already-dead person, in that the film presumes his rights in relation to us. How can this be?

One answer lies in the temporal perversions of nostalgia. As Alexandra Juhasz comments on AIDS video and nostalgia:

Nostalgia and video are ... profoundly linked to what Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* terms ‘a rebellion against a modern idea of time.’ Nostalgia and video are ... attempts to hold onto time, given its inevitable loss ... While nostalgia is typically understood as an emotion that is paltry and passive, I propose that when mixed with video, it has the potential to be substantial and productive. (321)

Figuring nostalgia as a “duration trouble” – “one defiantly wants something to endure that cannot and has not” – Juhasz cites video as a “duration solution in that it allows things to last ... Unlike memory or fantasy, which are personal and subjective, video is collective and objective in that it is unchanging while also being a mutually verifiable record of things that once were, are no longer, but remain present through the form of its mechanical reproduction” (322). Of course, these things do not actually “remain *present*,” they are, instead, *represented*. But this is precisely the work of memory: the gap between presence and representation marks for us our loss.

Surely, we who did not know Tom Joslin likely do not experience the same nostalgia that his friends, family, and lover do. But the multiple removals of *Life* install in us an overwhelming sense of loss that corresponds to the “real” loss of Joslin: we are removed in all the ways that film theorists such as Christian Metz have imagined film viewers to be,²⁴ *and* in the sense that Friedman’s work has removed us from the original videotape footage (prospects I will discuss in further depth below). When we watch Joslin dying on camera, the inability to touch, intervene, help is devastating. At the same time, the work of witnessing that we are nonetheless asked to do means that, regardless of the level of nostalgia we experience, we are helping to make good on the promise to Tom to “finish the tape.” After all, if we as viewers are watching *Silverlake Life*, what are we doing if not enacting in real time its “finish[ing]”? Indeed, even if we take “finish[ing] the tape” to mean something as simple as *watching the film til its finish*, something

profound happens. Not only do we keep the promise to Tom that Mark mentions, but we become part of the group that Mark says will do this work: his “friends.” Ethical obligations, again, work retroactively and not just proactively. Finishing *Silverlake Life* makes us friends with Tom, and we might, in turn, mourn the loss of this friend – a loss exacerbated by the fact that we “missed” his passing. In these ways, the film reformulates death’s usual narrative function, and shows this reformulation to be part of its queering of paternity and posterity. As Shoshana Felman describes in her essay on Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*,

If the story has thus managed to lose at once its author, its authority, its title, and its origin, *without losing itself* – without being itself suppressed, obliterated, or forgotten – it is because its written record has been repeatedly and carefully *transferred* from hand to hand: bequeathed first by the dying governess to Douglass, and then by the dying Douglass to the narrator. It is thus *death* which moves the narrative chain forward. ... By doing so, death paradoxically appears not as an end but rather as a starting point: the starting point of the *transferral* of the story. (173, emphasis original)

Generic and Formal Tensions

Thus far, I have primarily discussed the videotape footage shot by Joslin and Massi. Here, I will treat Friedman’s footage, arguing that his contributions, and the film’s subsequent fluctuation between autobiography and biography, create tensions that establish for us what is at stake in this queer project. These tensions exist primarily around the queer models of paternity and posterity that I have described. First, *Life* is consistently referred to as a documentary autobiography, or autobiographical documentary, and even when critics admit the presence of Friedman as a filmmaker, they call it a “shared autobiography” or “cooperative autobiography,” as Jim Lane does in *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (84). Those designations

make some sense insofar as the film provides a sustained look at both Massi and Joslin, and those two men operate the camera at various times. But Friedman's position as the posthumous camera operator²⁵ and editor renders the film, at least to a notable extent, a *biography*, a fact that complicates the ethics of "shar[ing]" and "cooperati[on]," and which threaten to install Friedman as auteur, as that "'clear' author" that the film festival organizers hoped for.

I want to focus on two distinct moments in the film that capture this generic-and-ideological tension.²⁶ First, Friedman's exposition includes a shot of (presumably) his hand placing a videotape into a VCR (see figure 2), before static appears and the footage rolls. This sequence resonates with those in which Friedman shows us the videotaped footage through the additional mediation of a TV screen – i.e., he has filmed it on the screen, rather than working directly through the tapes (see figures 3 and 4). Such compositions foreground his curatorial role, but they also have a phobic effect. Watching Friedman watching the original footage renders him our surrogate. While we will go on to "directly" view footage of the two men dying of AIDS, we will be hyper-conscious of the fact that it is always already removed from us by one extra step, handled for us immediately so that we do not have to, or simply cannot, touch it. The exposition's non-diegetic music reinforces this sense;²⁷ this ominous electronic soundtrack suggests that risk and peril – in short, the threats of disease – lie ahead.

Not only has Friedman personally handled these tapes, he has transferred the final edited video footage onto film²⁸ – further removing the always already removed viewer. In *The Imaginary Signifier* (1977), Metz remarks of the experience of cinema, "not only am I at a distance from the object ... but what remains in that distance is now no longer the object itself, it is a delegate it has sent me while itself withdrawing. A double withdrawal" (61). Film itself, in other words, marks an absence – of now-gone time, of inaccessible production conditions. The

very existence of *Silverlake Life* reminds us not only of our temporal and spatial distance from the bodies we see onscreen (they exist in the past), but our ontological difference (they exist in a dimension altogether removed, never accessible; they are not just gone, but dead and gone). Of course, unlike in classical Hollywood cinema, Joslin and Massi's filmed figures mark the past existence of real people – which the video status of *Silverlake Life*'s original footage indicates. But in Friedman's enactment of two additional kinds of removal – videotaping *the viewing* of the source videotapes, then transferring all of the video footage to film²⁹ – the phobic distance that *Silverlake Life* otherwise collapses is potentially telescoped. Moreover, once we recognize these figures as doubles in two senses – not just stand-ins for the Mark Massi and Tom Joslin of the film-time, but stand-ins for the Mark Massi and Tom Joslin who were once alive – they take on a rather uncanny, even frightening, status. As Freud explains, “the ‘double’ was originally ... an ‘energetic denial of the power of death,’ as [Otto] Rank says. ... The same desire led the Ancient Egyptians to develop the art of making images of the dead in lasting materials.” However, in post-primitive societies, and in individuals who have passed the childish stage of primary narcissism, “the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (235) – here, quite literally.

The other distinctive moment in *Silverlake Life* that creates generic-ideological tension comes near the film's end. We see video footage of an airplane window from Friedman's point of view, but we do not see him (see figure 5). Friedman intones, “before *Silverlake Life* could have any impact, it had to be completed ... Five months later I went ... to California to film an ending and to visit Mark.” This shot, and Friedman's statements, evince an orientation toward some of the elements of documentary filmmaking that *Silverlake Life* otherwise eschews, and toward classical narrative form in general (texts must have endings; texts that “impact” us must

have clear borders). In “Love, Death, and Videotape: *Silverlake Life*,” Seckinger and Jakobsen survey the late-1960s development of “new styles of documentary film production that may be roughly categorized as American direct cinema and French cinema vérité.” As they explain, “the observational documentary tradition known as American direct cinema ... reflects the positivist notion that seeing is believing. The ideology associated with this style likens the camera to a ‘fly on the wall,’ unobtrusively capturing spontaneous, untampered-with ‘reality.’” Such films “tend to be structured along narrative lines, following the activities of their characters to a climactic crisis and then denouement” (147). *Silverlake Life*’s video diary footage rejects the first in explicit terms, sympathizing more with the French cinema vérité form that

contrasts sharply with the fly-on-the-wall ideal ... This reflexive use of the camera, which does not seek to make itself invisible but rather continually reemphasizes the relationship(s) between filmer(s) and filmed and acknowledges, even focuses and comments upon, the camera’s presence, more resembles [vérité pioneer] Jean Rouch’s notion of the camera as a catalyst that can elicit hitherto unarticulated truths through its interaction with the subject than it does the distanced ‘objectivity’ of observational cinema. (149)

Of course, as I have noted, the video diary footage employs many of the techniques of cinema vérité and reflexive documentary, *without* seeking to “elicit truths.” And it provides us with a series of isolated, temporally unmarked moments rather than with a seamless narrative arc. But the external imputation of “an ending,” to use Friedman’s phrase, would ensure for the overall film the classical narrative schema of beginning-middle-end, thus bringing it closer to the kind of mode that does indeed promise “truths,” in the form of revelation and closure.

We must also note that, while Joslin and Massi are constantly on view in the film, we

never see Friedman's face. Not only does *Life* veer toward biography at those moments, and toward "detached," "objective" documentary modes, it also veers toward the norms of classical cinema. The AIDS-ravaged bodies of Joslin and Massi are on display for us, but not the body of this "(in case of a health disaster) Filmmaker." The healthy body becomes equivalent with the unseen, the unscrutinized, while the medical and filmic gazes render the queer body penetrable and, thus, pathological. (Notably, the film contains multiple instances of Joslin and Massi being examined by medical professionals who poke and prod them, putting them in CAT-scan machines, and visually inspecting their lesions.) Though Friedman is himself gay, he nonetheless takes on, through these circumstances, a quasi-heteronormative status that threatens to undo the work that Massi and Joslin's "you people" potentially achieves. As Kaja Silverman claims in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, "receptivity, specularity, and narcissism represent constitutive features of *all* subjectivity, even though [heterosexual] masculinity is predicated upon their denial" (363). The *lack of a body*, and, thus, lack of specularity, privileges Friedman in a corporeal sense, and also makes him the film's authority.

Indeed, we might say that Friedman is also masculinized/heterosexualized, while Joslin and Massi are feminized/queered, through the latter's narrator-status: Friedman's voiceovers ornament *Life*'s beginning and concluding sections. As Silverman notes in *The Acoustic Mirror*, "classical cinema ... [is] a textual model which holds the female voice and body insistently to the interior of the diegesis, while relegating the male subject to a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech, vision, or hearing" (ix). Friedman's footage is thus stylistically classical – it (visually) downplays the body of the filmmaker, while directing our attention to the subjects on screen, such as Massi, through an inescapable voice-of-God. And it is formally classical to the extent that it consists of the expository opening shots

already discussed, and this later moment centered on creating an “ending.” Friedman’s footage appears like an attempt to form a containing border around the video diary footage, and to create a beginning-middle-end schema for a film that otherwise consists of “the structure of chronicle, with its greater immediacy: a simple *taxis* (arrangement) of now this, now that” (Chambers 7).

Friedman’s work thus threatens to install within the film dominant standards of epistemological privilege and heteromascularity. But several important points must be made. First, the film’s final moments actually turn out to be not an “ending” shot by Friedman, but excerpts from Joslin’s *Blackstar*; the film flouts linear temporality in that the conclusion of the (1990s) story appears *before* the plot’s last shown event. Moreover, the “ending” that Friedman alludes to – his visit to Los Angeles to interview Mark – ends up constituting the beginning of the film; the latest footage in the overall history of the film’s production comes first. Indeed, what we have with *Silverlake Life* is not just a generic hybrid, but a temporal jumble. Chronology is subverted through the placement of footage, as well as through the lack of identification of footage throughout the film. That is, we usually cannot tell when events take place, or if they have been edited by Friedman in chronological order. (Only near the end of *Silverlake Life*, as Joslin lays dying, does anyone mention definitive dates and times.) Indeed, we cannot tell for certain *what* Friedman has done. When we see a given section of footage, we generally do not know its genealogy or “cause,” though we might be able to assume its source; has it been “manipulated” by Friedman, or simply transferred to film from video “as is”? In short, while Friedman foregrounds his role, he rarely indicates when or how it takes hold – leaving us at the same impasse that Tom and Mark’s lack of interest in citing a source for their HIV/AIDS left us: who knows, who cares? In fact, we might say that *Silverlake Life*’s obfuscation of epistemology and causality – and, more specifically, its critique of the

heteronormative and patriarchal purchases thereof – is actually heightened by the film’s inclusion of generally *non-reflexive* documentary footage. While this inclusion contrasts, and thus illuminates, the workings of the video diary footage, the fact is that even the seemingly omniscient expository/observational footage does not, ultimately, provide epistemological certainty.

Finally, Friedman’s foregrounding of filmmaking decisions exposes the hidden manipulations of film form. To explicitly cite the desire to “film an ending” reveals that no ending simply “exists:” the beginning-middle-end schema that governs bodies, AIDS bodies in particular, and classical narrative form, is neither wholly natural, nor necessarily self-evident. Indeed, both the intrafilmic discourse (Friedman’s references to his role), and the extrafilmic discourse (such as Jim Hubbard’s 2001 *GLQ* article “Fever in the Archive,” which announces the availability of *Life*’s source tapes) stress to us that the lives and bodies constructed through *Silverlake Life* are the result of editorial distillation. Unlike the vast majority of classical Hollywood films, and even avant-garde films, the source material for *Silverlake Life* is available to the public; while the film itself clocks in at 99 minutes, it was culled from almost 40 hours of videotape footage now held by the Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection at the New York Public Library. In theory, we might say that many *Silverlake Lives* could have existed, that any number of moments could have been culled from this footage – especially considering how, here, strict temporal order has been eschewed without sacrificing affect. The auteurist notion of a “*hard core* of basic and often recondite motifs” (Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, quoted in Wollen 80, my emphasis), of a manifest, inviolable essence that could not have been otherwise, is not so manifest when we begin to look at everything on the cutting room floor, when we have evidence of disposed-of “motifs.”

Of course, all films, including classical Hollywood films, emerge from hours of unseen footage, and from the unseen work of editors. But *Silverlake Life*, even in the hands of would-be auteur Friedman, emphasizes the existence of things such as the manipulation of time, the utter contingency of happenings, and the narrativization of events – the very processes that classical cinema downplays. That is, the film makes plain that, even though it depicts real people and their deterioration with an unflinching eye, it is subject to the demands of classical narrative realism, and to the norms of textual production at large.³⁰ Thus, I propose that we read Friedman’s machinations not as anomalies to be dismissed, *nor* as creating minor tensions that the “real” reflexive footage simply triumphs over. The fact remains that these machinations threaten to render the film a more classical example of documentary – one in which the subjects are scrutinized members of a subgroup, while the privileged documentarian goes unnoticed – and a more classical example of cinema, period – one which favors “endings,” which manipulates viewers through music, and so forth. But as Bill Nichols argues,

The appearance of a new [documentary] mode results from challenge and contestation in relation to a previous mode. (We might say that reflexive documentaries call into question assumptions common to all three of the other modes [expository, observational, and interactive]... .) *An orderly succession, however, does not in fact follow* since established modes are not rendered inoperative or incapable of producing results by newer ones. (23, my emphasis)

Friedman’s footage, then, is an integral component of *Silverlake Life*’s project. Its existence troubles the neat notion of the “orderly succession” of documentary modes – a notion that just so happens to invoke the language of paternity and posterity – and its inclusion makes clear for us the still-operative ideology of the “old” (straight) cinema that New Queer Cinema works against.

Pale Fire

A bare-bones organizational description of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is perhaps the best way to approach this complex text, which has occasioned decades of ferocious critical debate. The Vintage edition announces itself as "Pale Fire," "A Novel by Vladimir Nabokov," but a subsequent "Contents" page indicates our entry into something fashioned not as a fictional narrative, but as a critical edition of a creative work. Under "Contents," we find the following items: "Foreword," "Pale Fire: A Poem in Four Cantos," "Commentary," and "Index." The Foreword, Commentary, and Index are attributed to (and written in the voice of) Charles Kinbote, curator of the poetic manuscript since the death of its author, John Shade. Shade, in turn, is positioned as the author of the autobiographical poem "Pale Fire," which details in more or less chronological order such events as his childhood, his marriage, and the suicide of his only daughter.

What makes *Pale Fire* more than a simple facsimile of a critical edition are the tonal and content-related ways we find that form flagrantly violated. To begin with, Kinbote is made to look unprofessional, biased, and even mentally ill, from the start. He notes in the Preface that his adoption of the manuscript from Shade's widow has been called a "fantastic farrago of evil" (16) by the poet's former lawyer, and tells us through his commentary that he is the exiled king of a country called Zembla. (He has found refuge in small-town America by posing as an academic and taking a job at Wordsmith College alongside Shade.) And perhaps most importantly, Kinbote's commentary consists of more than the normal critical or etymological comments: it includes the unfolding story of his own life, as well as an account of his friendship with Shade.

Presumably based on these anomalies, critics have debated the genealogy of "Pale Fire"

the poem, as well as the larger text-within-a-text that we might call *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*. (I will use this latter title throughout, to distinguish that text from both the novel and the individual poem.) Some have insisted that (we read the novel as if) Kinbote has doctored Shade's poem, if not actually written it himself. Others have insisted that the two men are the same person; some of the adherents to this view therefore argue that (we should read the novel as if) Shade is responsible for all sections – and, thus, not “actually” dead within the diegesis. Still others have developed more elaborate theories, such as Brian Boyd's argument that “Shade helps Kinbote compose the commentary from beyond the grave” (Reading 85).³¹ While not discounting the fact that these debates raise useful questions about how Nabokov makes meaning within the text, they are highly problematic. First, to enter into such a debate is to insist that “truth” and “knowledge” should be the goals of textual interpretation, and, moreover, that objective “truth” and “knowledge” can always be accessed. Whether or not this holds for “real” fictional texts – Shakespearean plays, for example – is still under fierce debate. But to assign an author to a *totally fictional* text – *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* – looks more baldly, and perhaps more ridiculously, like an attempt to control meaning through the hermeneutic of authorship. As Barthes claims in “The Death of the Author,” “once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text ... to close the writing. ... When the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ – victory to the critic” (146).

But we might term this victory, at least in terms of *Pale Fire*, a hollow one. Returning to Felman's work on *The Turn of the Screw*, we are reminded, first, that in attempting to diagnosis madness (in this case, Kinbote's) and thus ferret out the “real” story of the text, one fails to mark oneself off as, in contrast, sane: “literature has no outside ... there is no safe spot assuredly

outside of madness, from which one might demystify and judge it, locate it in the Other without oneself participating in it” (240). We are reminded, secondly, of the violence done to certain texts in the name of “truth.” Felman criticizes scholarly efforts to “eliminate[e] the heterogeneity of meaning, the very scandal of contradiction and ambiguity” – efforts that, as I have shown, are invested in maintaining traditional models of reproduction and posterity. She argues,

The attempt ... to eliminate contradiction itself partakes of the contradiction: the affirmation of meaning as *undivided* is simultaneously one that *excludes* the position of the opponent; the homogeneity of meaning can be asserted but through the expulsion of its heterogeneity. In precisely trying to *unify* the meaning of the text and to proclaim it as unambiguous, the critics only mark more forcefully its constitutive *division* and duplicity.
(160)

But, of course, something unique about *Pale Fire*, and, in turn, its critical treatment, emerges when we consider how Felman’s charge applies to this treatment: while *Pale Fire*’s meaning, and the origins of given passages, might be ambiguous, *the parts of the text as we have them are not divisible*; the poem “Pale Fire,” for example, does not exist as such outside of the commentary on it, and thus the former can never be fully divided from the latter. Paradoxically, we might say that this is what makes the multi-part text recognizable as a novel.

It is at this moment that we must directly confront an inevitable aspect of *Pale Fire*: that it constitutes a text within a text – *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* within *Pale Fire* the novel. But that “outside” text is basically ephemeral, amounting to, one might even say, the initial title page that states “Pale Fire: A Novel by Vladimir Nabokov,” and the final empty blank page that appears in the Vintage edition. Thus, what we have to read is essentially *only* the text within a text. I want to see what happens when we simply take that text for what it is: a poem, and

editorial commentary and indexing related to that poem. I do so not merely to pay attention to what John Haegert calls the “different intellectual pleasures . . . arising from Nabokov’s epistemological quandaries” (408), but to show that the queer body, and its concomitant sterility-and-contamination, pose the central epistemological quandry in the text.³² To begin with, whether or not, say, John Shade and Charles Kinbote are one person, the simple fact remains that Nabokov presents us with an eroticized interface between two male creative figures, through which “ultimate” responsibility comes into question. The erotic components of this encounter, when placed alongside the text’s concerns with *biological* procreation, have a particular effect: the issues of paternity and posterity within the text appear neither fully literal/biological, nor fully discursive/formal. That is, authorship and collaboration do not become touchstones for sex or reproduction – or vice versa. Rather, as we have learned from *Silverlake Life*, dominant culture formulates its concerns about clear artistic genealogy and posterity through concerns about the queer body and its disruptive potential – concerns that both texts dismiss by actually caring about posterity *in a queer way*, and by imagining textual production in terms un beholden to heteronormative standards.

Pale Fire in Context

In his article, “Queer, Queer Vladimir,” Steven Bruhm argues that *Pale Fire* encodes politicized concerns about the queer body and its difference/sameness. As he describes, “straight America during the Cold War was plagued by the feeling that homosexuals were, on the one hand, everywhere in culture and politics and, on the other hand, impossible to detect” (284) – leading to an atmosphere of paranoia and scrutiny overlapped by anti-communism.³³ The queer’s difference, moreover, was predicated on an American fear of sameness filtered through the notion of gay narcissism; as Bruhm elaborates, “while the psychopathologizing of narcissism

occurred early in the century, not much had changed in regard to theories of homosexuality in the 1950s and 60s, the time of the publication of *Pale Fire*” (287). Implicit in these homophobic conceptions are (paradoxically opposed) notions of sterility and contagion; the queer’s investment in sameness conjures up fears of replication at the expense of (proper) reproduction, while his ubiquitous body invokes paranoia about infiltration and infection. Besides Cold War anti-communism and xenophobia, then, these fears can be traced back to the fears of simulacra and mechanical reproduction ushered in during this late modernist/postmodern era, and to a host of simultaneous cultural changes: changes in traditional gender roles, sexual mores, and reproductive technology – the latter of which threatened to destabilize the norms of biological reproduction, and masculine control thereof.³⁴

Pale Fire both depicts how the queer invokes fears around these issues, and fails to take those fears seriously. In fact, from a reproductive standpoint, queerness in *Pale Fire* is often associated not with sameness, but with slippages, and it supplants heterosexuality as that which can produce anew. Thus, whereas Bruhm argues that “the queerness of Nabokovian prose in *Pale Fire* is that it registers through the homosexual a desire for difference in what is commonly understood as a facile attraction to sameness” (302), I argue that *Pale Fire* responds to the debates around sameness/difference by presenting different models of queer (re)productivity. I will focus on ejaculation imagery and the theme of variants (meaning textual variations – though, as I will show, variant sexual practices come into focus thereby) as the means by which these models are advanced.³⁵ The first model attempts to validate male-male artistic collaboration on the grounds of heterosexual reproduction – that is, two creative efforts combine to produce a final object with discernable genealogy and predictable posterity. This model makes queer collaboration subject to those normative standards. The second model is more radical in nature. It

leaves influence and contribution undetermined and offers multiple possible genealogies – thereby validating queer sexuality for its own “ends,” or lack thereof. *Pale Fire*, I argue, thus shows the shifting cultural borders of 1962: the border between gay and lesbian assimilation on the one hand, and queer radicalism on the other; and the border between the traditional union of sexuality and biological reproduction, and the increasing dissolution of that union.

Jean Walton notes that “critics have, for the most part, insisted on metaphorizing or pathologizing Kinbote’s sexuality.” She seeks to “elaborate the parameters of a more culturally specific reading of homoeroticism in the novel, one that treats it for its material rather than its figurative ramifications” (91). I too am wary of brushing aside the text’s homoeroticism as a symbol of a “real issue” – after all, the depiction of Kinbote’s persecution on the specific grounds of his homosexuality makes such a move nearly impossible, especially considering Bruhm’s strong case for the novel’s reflection of a climate of politicized homophobia. And my reading is certainly skeptical of critics’ efforts to pathologize Kinbote’s sexuality, *specifically with the effect of metaphorizing it or rendering it a sign*: that is, many critics take his homosexuality as a confirmation of his instability, his narcissism, and his delusion.³⁶ (In Chapter 4, I describe how the film *Safe* refuses to allow AIDS to be metaphorized, because of the purposes to which such metaphorization can be put.) But Walton’s distinction between the material and the figurative ramifications of homoeroticism is, precisely, what *Pale Fire* shows to be a nearly impossible one for dominant culture to make: queerness is not linked to anti-normative authorship by any random analogizing, or vice versa, and this link – which we see in *Silverlake Life* in 1993 – has been circulating in Western culture since at least 1962. Any attempt to simply “see queerness for what it is” overlooks the fact that queerness negatively figures hegemonic cultural values. Moreover, while Walton’s insistence that we take Kinbote’s sexuality

seriously is well-placed, we must be careful not to ignore less obviously-queer bodies. After all, concentrating on Kinbote as “the” homosexual keeps us from seeing that the ostensibly heterosexual figure of John Shade is, necessarily, drawn into the queer model that *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* maps out. In this model, male bodies cannot uphold the myth of the solitary genius, do not show interest in establishing paternity or caring for normative posterity, and, most graphically, do not control their own secretions – moves that interrogate the inviolability of the male body, regardless of sexuality.

“Superfluous Ejaculation”³⁷

Pale Fire constantly employs the imagery of male ejaculation, a fact that has yet to be explored in depth by critics. Of course, the book is rife with overdetermined images and allusions, and it delights in crude and comic references to (homo)sexuality. But ejaculation is directly tied within the book to the major concerns of self-making and authorship and, as such, it marks several ideological shifts within the text: from the privileging of the solitary Genius-Author, to the insistence on the fruits of a reciprocal reproduction, to a more queer interest in collaboration that does not insist upon clear paternity or final products. Thus, ejaculate emerges through *Pale Fire* as what sociologist Lisa Jean Moore calls a substance “that traffics between biological and social worlds. That is, sperm is both a material and a symbolic entity, is a part of both nature and culture, and has scientific and social value” (12).

In fact, while Moore ascribes the “panic over the decrease in sperm counts [that] fits in with perceived crises of masculinity, heterosexuality, family, and nation” (xv) to contemporary times, it can be seen to begin much earlier, in *Pale Fire*’s Cold War milieu. As I will show, the bodily transformation of male arousal and ejaculation – whether literal or figurative, real or imagined – is always a potentially queer one, but one that normally gets recuperated in

representations thereof through a focus on the teleology of ejaculation, the creative powers of the male body, or the prospect of biological reproduction. These recuperations, in other words, fetishize the solid/product, rather than of the liquid/process, and insist on usefulness rather than uselessness. In referencing, but rejecting, these recuperations, *Pale Fire* presents for us a new queer ethics of literary form, one that refuses critical “detective work” and one that cares neither about paternity nor posterity.

Amy Reading’s “Vulgarity’s Ironist: New Criticism, Midcult, and Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*” summarizes *Pale Fire*’s embrace by 1970s poststructuralism:

Suddenly there was a scholarly niche market for meta-novels and a vocabulary for talking about the reader’s negotiation of the novel’s narrative levels as a parable for the operation of language itself. Mattine Hennard’s summation typifies such readings: “The interaction between Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary can be viewed (that is, interpreted in its turn) as an allegory of reading: no longer authorized, meaning ceases to be original, definite and definitive, and starts ‘wandering’” ... With hindsight its difficult poetics (and fraught critical reception) came to seem the growing pains of a new paradigm, and the novel was reclassified as perhaps the archetypal example of “limit-modernism.” (93)

What Reading does not mention – and what I analyze here – is that *Pale Fire*’s confounding of “authoriz [ation]” and “original[ity]” are not merely intellectual in scope. They incorporate what we now consider postmodern interest in critiquing the dominance of heterosexuality and masculinism, and the “naturalness” of processes such as biological reproduction. Indeed, the text’s interest in “wandering” or slippage is centered not merely in the figure of the text, but in the figure of the human body.

Charles Kinbote first describes John Shade in terms of a kind of asexual reproduction, of

masturbatory self-making. He notes that “his body ... [was] only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiseled his verse. He was his own cancellation” (26). He also notes that he first conceived of Shade’s thought process as a kind of individual biological transformation:

Here he is, I would say to myself ... I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. (27)

But Kinbote’s initial reverence for this individuality soon shifts into an obsession with collaboration and reciprocity that he figures in even more explicitly sexual terms. He recalls,

By the end of May I could make out the outlines of some of my images in the shape his genius might give them; by mid-June I felt sure at last that he would recreate in a poem the dazzling Zembla [Kinbote’s native country] burning in my brain ... I saturated him with my vision ... [until] at length I knew he was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes, ready to spurt at the brush of an eyelash. (80)

Upon finally reading the poem he equivocates somewhat, confiding:

Although I realize only too clearly, alas, that the result, in its pale and diaphanous final phase, cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative ... one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of ... [my life] story acted as a catalytic agent upon the very process of the sustained creative effervescence that enabled Shade to produce a 1000-line poem in three weeks. (81)

Kinbote’s raw materials, his life story, have not been taken up in any kind of heterosexual [i.e.

“fifty-fifty”] production; it has not been the case that “the glory of Zembla [has] merge[d] with the glory of [Shade’s verse].” But an undeniable process of sexualized production has occurred nonetheless: Kinbote has inspired Shade’s “ejaculations.” These ejaculations do not reproduce Zembla, but they represent something more important: *a record of the interaction between the two*. In this model, the product itself – and, specifically, the *reflection of paternity or ownership* therein – is less important than the experiences that occasion the product.

Kinbote indicates that he has eventually shifted to such a model, stating in the Preface (written last, chronologically, though it comes first in the text) that “without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his ... has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide” (28-9). This comment echoes Susanna Egan’s article on *Silverlake Life*, “Autobiography as Interaction,” in which she notes that

Even though lives and stories contain many crucial people other than the narrators, theorists have not thought about autobiography as an interactive genre even at the very simple level of what one might call “interpersonal relations.” They have difficulty, therefore, in recognizing autobiography that adjusts self-definition in order to accommodate unexpected or original relations with others. (597)

A text such as *Silverlake Life* that depicts interaction, in other words, is believed to be a degraded form of autobiography, if recognized as autobiography at all – though, in Egan’s persuasive view, the depiction of interaction can give an autobiographical work a depth it might not otherwise have. Considering that both Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary are autobiographical, we might say that *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* puts forth a new version of autobiography not based upon singular selfhood, and not dependent upon the final product of the

text-occasioned-by-death. This new version stresses the self as constructed by the Other – Shade’s life as partially constructed by Kinbote, and Kinbote’s life as partially constructed by Shade. Thus, John Haegert’s comment that “perhaps no chance remark in modern literature has occasioned more amusement or prompted more perplexity than that of Charles Kinbote” (405) – that, “without [his] notes, Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all” – is less a reflection of the statement’s actual absurdity than of the standards by which we judge the “reality” of autobiography, and the reverence with which we hold the prospect of individual genius.

As we have seen in *Silverlake Life*, the documentary form does not simply lay bare the “reality” of a life; reality must be carefully constructed through interaction and collaboration. Here, *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* likewise evinces skepticism toward documentation-as-reality. It rejects the possibility of simply “illuminating” the original text, and instead insists that meaning only emerges *through interaction* between the editor and author. This collaboration takes place in a unique temporal dimension, just like *Silverlake Life*’s collaboration: according to Kinbote’s principles, the work of the dead only really exists to the extent that it is carried on by the living – indicating that the productive powers of collaboration are such that they need not even require two contemporaneous bodies.

Here, Kinbote rejects two iterations of a heterosexual model that, while initially appearing queer, ultimately favor stability and conservatism. Either Kinbote “impregnates” Shade – as “ripe with my Zembla” suggests – *and/or* Shade ejaculates something like a finished poem – as “bursting with suitable rhymes” suggests. In the former iteration, Kinbote acts as both contributor of the raw material (a feminine position by traditional understandings of procreation), and contributor of the animating material (a masculine position by those understandings), thus reformulating the traditional gender politics of procreation. In the latter iteration, Shade’s poetry

is contingent upon bodily proximity to another man. But both of these models emphasize finished products, products that one could scrutinize in order to, theoretically, determine “real” or “majority” authorship, and to determine who contributed what. In the model Kinbote arrives at, that which echoes Egan’s view, the eroticism of the encounter between the two matters more than who has contributed what. Critics such as Philip Sicker believes this move is compensatory; he argues, “instead of finding his visionary creation insulated within Shade’s poem, [Kinbote] is finally forced to subsume Shade’s poem within his own enveloping commentary” (317). But even if Kinbote is “forced,” he ultimately accepts this interactive model. And *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* exists as such a model in any case: Shade’s poem simply *is* subsumed within Kinbote’s commentary, and, thus, reading the text is an experience of negotiating multiple, intersecting levels of discourse, rather than one of arriving at a ultimate truth.

More precisely, in the interactive model offered by *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*, ejaculation destabilizes the male body from which it emanates. That is, the singular male body no longer stands as the inviolate source of meaning; masculine attributes such as self-sufficiency and dominance in conveying reproductive materials are decoupled from the male-sexed body. Murat Aydemir’s full-length study of ejaculation imagery, *Images of Bliss* (2007), discusses the queer dimensions of such destabilization. Writing of the contemporary hysteria around sperm counts, he notes, “the [perceived] assault on masculinity issues not only from the ... environment, the uterus, and culture, but also from other sperm, other men. Apparently, then, there is not enough masculinity in the world to be shared equally by all men; masculinity is a scarce commodity that must be fought over” (xv). While *Pale Fire* takes place some 30 years before this cultural conversation, the 1960s certainly saw perceived threats to white male supremacy from such corners as feminism and decolonization movements.³⁸ Moreover, within

Pale Fire, Kinbote is concerned with John Shade's scarcity, in that he has to share him with his wife, Sybil. And yet Kinbote is willing to give up the fight, to allow that another's "saturation" might drown out his own. In not configuring all male ejaculate as scarce and therefore precious, Kinbote dethrones it, making it much like any other bodily fluid.

This dethroning is, according to Aydemir, always a possibility; drawing on Irigaray, he notes that, despite its central importance in patriarchal heteronormativity, semen always subverts its own reputation:

Semen cannot be reduced to either the presence or the absence of a solid ... when concretely visible as a fluid object, semen cannot be idealized in a phallic, yet absent, shape. At the same time, the liquid remains too present in its material characteristics to be rendered as castration. Hence, the substance that issues from the solid penis to generate the equally solid product, the child,³⁹ and that is thus central for the maintenance and reproduction of the economy that, according to Irigaray, gives preeminence to solids, itself does not fit in that economy. Indeed, as a liquid, sperm shares that crucial characteristic with the uterine, environmental, and cultural 'sea' that envelopes and threatens masculine form. Semen, then, is somehow both central and excessive to the phallic economy, potentially as deforming as it is formative. (xvii)

While not every ejaculation ends in, or is intended for, the production of the "solid product" of a child, semen nonetheless operates heterosexually and patriarchally in the cultural imagination – as an analogue for male creativity, productivity, and power. A man who pays less attention to the masculinity and the "solid product" that semen can establish, than to the liquid substance itself – or who pays less attention to the benefits of singular masculine authorship than to the erotics of collaboration – is by definition one who *queers* masculinity, and, thus, queers

“meaning.”

Throughout *Pale Fire*, we see just how threatening these ethics of collaboration can be to the dominant social establishment. First, when discussing his initial disappointment over the final poem, Kinbote comments that “his widow, and his colleagues, may *stop worrying* and enjoy in full the fruit of whatever advice they gave my good-natured poet. Oh yes, the final text of the poem is entirely his” (81, my emphasis). (But that’s no longer the point, one might add.) Shade’s widow, Sybil, is likewise figured as a phobic obstacle to the two men’s access to one another, an interceptor of the flow of semen-and/or-inspiration. Kinbote recounts a time when Sybil attempts to block Kinbote from talking to Shade while the poet is bathing; Shade roars, “Let him in, Sybil, he won’t rape me!” (264). And the two men’s colleagues ridicule Kinbote, noting that he resembles the “fancy pansy” king of Zembla (268). The homophobia inherent in the “worry” over Kinbote’s role is the same invested in reestablishing Shade’s solo, “asexual” reproduction, in asserting that “the final text of the poem is entirely his.” In other words, through its depiction of John Shade, the staid, venerated American poet, and through the depiction of the hysteria over his association with a would-be collaborator, *Pale Fire* reminds us that the myth of the singular author is, paradoxically, inherently heterosexual, while textual collaboration is figured as sexually queer, even aggressively so. As Walton argues,

Insofar as it functions to preserve the boundaries that define the “body” of the author’s work against undesirable incursions from critically deviant “bodies,” this literary critical establishment [of rendering the author’s supposed intentions transparent] is coextensive with the heterosexual establishment that function to preserve its (“normal,” “healthy”) integrity against the undesirable incursions of the sexually deviant body. (100)

Regimes of Queerness

Kinbote's queerness presents an obstacle to normative paternity, and to "end products," in an explicitly biological sense: as King Charles of Zembla, he perverted the course of state power by refusing heterosexual reproduction. As he notes in his Commentary, "since the very beginning of his reign ... representatives of the nation ... had been doing their utmost to persuade [Charles] to give up his copious but sterile pleasures and take a wife" (173). Kinbote suggests that homosexuality is a winked-at national pastime of sorts in Zembla; as he elaborates, "it was a matter not of morality but of succession. As in the case of some of his predecessors, rough alderkings who burned for boys, the clergy blandly ignored our young bachelor's pagan habits, but wanted him to do what an earlier and even more reluctant Charles had done: take a night off and engender an heir" (173). But King Charles cannot even do this; even after "farc[ing] himself with aphrodisiacs, ... the anterior characters of Disa's [the woman he eventually took as his queen] unfortunate sex kept fatally putting him off" (208). A revolution ensues, and Kinbote ends up in New Wye, in exile.

Of course, one could argue that Kinbote's identity as King Charles is a pure fabrication within *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*, not just *Pale Fire* the novel. Indeed, we never receive independent confirmation of the existence of *Zembla*, much less Kinbote's past as the king thereof – yet another one of the epistemological quandaries Nabokov creates for the reader. But when we suspend the question of veracity (which can never be definitively answered anyway, considering that we are privy to no other individual's perspective besides Kinbote's, and considering that there is no "real" author other than Nabokov), we see that this episode spells out for us the very high stakes of normative genealogy. Even in a context that accepts queerness, hetero-reproduction is considered essential to maintaining government rule – a non-democratic rule, at that. These high stakes make Kinbote's eventual decision to accept the lack of his

“likeness” in the poem all the more dramatic, whether or not he has actually “failed” an entire nation or simply imagined doing so. Moreover, Kinbote has preemptively responded to charges of veracity early on, insisting that it matters less than affect. As Michael Seidel summarizes, when Shade asks Kinbote

how he knows that all this intimate stuff about the Zemblan king is true, ... Kinbote replies that the issue is not authenticity so much as another kind of truth: “My dear John ... do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff *will* be true, and the people *will* come alive. A poet’s unified truth can cause no pain, no offense” ... He doesn’t exactly answer Shade’s question, but he does imply that the project, in all senses, is more important than the verificiation of its particulars. (842)

Such a “project” must be understood as a queer one. First, the refusal of “verification” defies the patriarchal economy intent upon the proper commuting of property and power along biological lines. Second, the emphasis on “project” rather than “product” highlights creative interaction over creative production. Even if we reject Kinbote’s logic, and insist that it *does* matter if his reportage is true, and whether or not he was the king of Zembla, this will not change the fact that *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* is staged as an exercise in those values.

At times, Kinbote’s homoerotics create something on the order of a Greek model of sexuality, in which the masculine dominates the feminine (regardless of gender) and the female is degraded as a sexual partner. Paul Allen Miller, writing of “that kind of extreme valorization of masculinity and male homosociality which finds its ultimate expression in what Irigaray has punningly termed ‘hommosexuality,’” notes: “consistent with this semiotics of virility, Kinbote labels his own sexual practices ‘manly’ or ‘masculine’ ... while denigrating the sexuality of women” (77). In fact, Kinbote appears clearly misogynist, especially considering his hatred of

Sybil Shade, his alienation of his own wife, Queen Disa, and his general phobia of female sexuality and female bodies.

But we might better describe Kinbote's attitude toward women not as simple misogyny, but as a heterophobia that contrarily prizes "useless" homoeroticism over "useful" heterosexuality. To begin with, within the sociocultural milieu of *Pale Fire*, women represent a telos for male creativity/reproductivity; they represent the juncture at which the fluidity of ejaculation becomes solidity, at which purpose takes precedence over pleasure. Indeed, it is not Kinbote, but the imperatives of heterosexual reproductivity, and the requirements of patriarchal lineage, that turn Queen Disa into a mere receptacle.⁴⁰ Further, we might say that Kinbote's figuration of woman-as-devouring-parasite – to take one crude example, he notes that Sybil Shade's maiden name comes "from the French for 'swallow'" (171) – is not merely a reaction to heteronormativity, but to explicit homophobia: woman-as-(procreative) parasite counters gay-male-as-(creative) parasite.

Kinbote's reactions, in fact, have feminist ramifications as well as queer ones. They highlight women's subjection to the reproductive regime – a subjection that was only beginning to be loosened as Nabokov was writing⁴¹ – and they question biological reproduction as the "ultimate" destiny for a body. While Walton argues that "it is important to note that by and large, the women in *Pale Fire* function as heterosexually prescribed erotic objects ... or the enforcers of heterosexuality ... or rivals in the pursuit of male sexual objects" (93), she does not consider that the second and third might be mere effects of the first – which *Pale Fire* itself indicates. That is, women's interests in wooing men emerge out of a male-run framework intent upon preserving patrilineality – not out of some homophobic female hegemony. As stated, Disa is recruited to marry King Charles only for the purposes of producing an heir for Zembla – an act

decreed because even that queer country of Zembla values the maintenance of elite bloodlines. Regardless of her personal feelings, Disa is acting under a regime of literal compulsory heterosexuality. And it is only under the rule of compulsory heterosexuality that Sibyl Shade could appear to Kinbote as a “rival in the pursuit of male sexual objects.” After all, while the need for an heir “ushers in an altogether different Zembla, one that insists upon a sexuality inseparable from reproduction” (Walton 95), sexuality is *always* connected to reproduction in the “real” world of New Wye, if not the “real” world of the late-twentieth century West. Kinbote’s machinations thus have radical implications for these “real” worlds. He proposes, instead, a reproduction that is connected to *sexuality*, but not necessarily to *sex*; and he proposes a queerness that need not be sterile and, thus, function as the “opposite” of heterosexuality. This latter point has further implications: if heterosexuality is understood as that which is reproductive, and homosexuality its “opposite,” then the prospect of a homosexuality that produces on its own terms destabilizes that structuring opposition.

We might also note that Kinbote’s understandings of reproduction itself are more complicated than the classical Greek models he nonetheless valorizes at points. His privileging of male ejaculate at first appears to correspond to the Aristotelian understanding of reproduction, which makes a hierarchical, “radical distinction between the male and female generative materials ... Males, in Aristotle’s account, produce *sperma*, which is the efficient cause in generation, and females do not. Females provide instead the *catamenia*, which is the material” (Laqueur 41). The active male agent acts upon the passive female matter, “animating” it. Kinbote’s disregard for females, then, makes sense within this schema. But his insistence on a reciprocal, or dual, ejaculation, does not. After all, in Aristotle’s “one-seed tradition” (Laqueur 41), only *one man*, and one seed thereof, is needed. In other words, male ejaculate is *supposed* to

behave like John Shade-as-Author: producing a fully-formed entity with virtually no other assistance.⁴² By rejecting this model, and insisting on the importance of male-male collaboration, Kinbote's ethos and his ejaculation/insemination imagery show semen in particular, and male creativity in general, to be much less powerful, singular, and privileged than once believed. While women may be irrelevant in this schema, a normative patriarchal masculinity does not, in turn, prevail: one man alone is simply insufficient for (re)production.

Kinbote's sexual politics also eschew hierarchism in that they reject common binaries. As Miller provocatively argues, "homosexuality versus heterosexuality ... [is] the master binarism" within the novel, as well as the most deconstructed – it is "an ideological switching point which both coordinates and disrupts the movement of the other ... oppositions" within the novel, including "the effeminate versus the virile; the European versus the American; refined intricacy versus naïve simplicity; and aristocratic culture versus lower class barbarism" (75).⁴³ So, for example, if we catalog Kinbote's attraction to men and boys of varying races, class positions, and educational backgrounds, we find that "the association of homoerotic feelings with attraction to either the socially marginal or those who eschew cultural refinement is pervasive throughout the novel, making our seemingly stable notions of virility, simplicity, sexuality, and cultural identity ever more difficult to define" (81). But the homoerotic and homosexual encounters in the novel are also diverse in terms of the age and temporal status of the persons in question. While Miller makes reference to "the novel's crucible of pederasty" (82) – and, indeed, Kinbote *does* appear to enjoy the company of younger students – the two most prominent homoerotic relationships in the novel do not fit the model of hierarchical dominance, of masculine over feminine and older over younger, that pederasty rests upon. First, Kinbote frequently recalls his long-dead childhood love, Oleg, who was his peer and constant companion in Zemblan days.

After recording his first sexual encounter with Oleg, Kinbote states, “[the] structure and maculation [of this detailed recollection] have taken some time to describe in this note” (127). Again, (collaborative) writing is intertwined with (queer) erotics; “maculation” registers the “stain” of ink, the “stain” of ejaculate, and the “stain” of sexual dissidence all at once. Second, the central relationship within *Pale Fire* is, of course, that between John Shade and Charles Kinbote. While Kinbote denies that he is attracted to Shade based on age, he is clearly obsessed with him in terms that are nothing less than erotic in conception, if not in physical execution.

The idea of an eroticism that can span both time and space is particularly meaningful, considering that the diversity inherent to Shade and Kinbote’s relationship soon takes on the weight of two wholly different dimensions of time: more than simply recording Kinbote’s interactions with Shade in life, *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* constitutes Kinbote’s collaboration with Shade *in death*. Thus, when critics claim, as does Sicker, that Kinbote’s need for “*direct* creative amalgamation is so acute that, when faced ... with the irremediable separation of Shade’s death, he *makes* himself a collaborator ... by insisting ... that Shade’s poem and his Commentary are indispensable to one another, that they exist only *in relation* to one another” (314, my emphasis), they fail to understand the coup of *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*, and the actual form of *Pale Fire* the novel: Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s Commentary *are* indispensable to one another; they *do* only exist in relation to one another. Perhaps the point is actually too obvious: in reading *Pale Fire* the novel, we have no recourse to the poem outside of Kinbote’s *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*. Not only does this fact expand the boundaries of human life and sexuality – one can interact with the other, and experience an erotic charge with him/her, even in death – it speaks, like *Silverlake Life*, to the ethics of working retrospectively for the dead. Typical patterns of inheritance come into question when the curator refuses to

wholly supersede the absent writer, but actually insists upon his continued presence.⁴⁴ In short, within Kinbote's world, a non-hierarchical ethics of collaboration and encounter come to preside not just over asexual models of male genius, and not just over heterosexual models of reproductivity and posterity, but over homosexual models that nonetheless stress traditional paternity and posterity, and hierarchy.

The figure of Hazel Shade in *Pale Fire* allows the text to critique these other reproductive models, particularly the asexual one that would make John Shade a singular Author. In writing of his daughter, Shade observes, "she might have been you, me, or some quaint blend:/*Nature chose me so as to wrench and rend/Your heart and mine*" (43, my emphasis). Despite Sybil and Shade's heterosexual copulation, the outcome is not actually a hybrid, not "hetero." The outcome is a rather improbable "homo," a daughter produced solely of a father – or, at least, *one figured as such*. Although queerness in the homophobic imagination is characterized as producing sameness, here, conventional sexuality has this outcome: it replicates rather than truly reproducing (producing something that is a "blend"). Moreover, what is replicated is Shade; he is the singular Author of Hazel. But while he can easily detect himself in her – a possibility that Kinbote's edition of "Pale Fire" refuses to tender – we see just how distressing that ability is, "rend[ing] [Sybil's] heart and [Shade's]" (43). Considering, in contrast, the fact that John Shade and Charles Kinbote are vastly different on multiple levels (age, race, sexuality, nationality), and considering that we cannot definitively divide up the text based on authorship, we see one of *Pale Fire*'s central operations: as *queer interaction* begins to look more hetero than heterosexuality, and non-replicable to boot, heterosexuality's dominance becomes destabilized.

Hazel also has great resonance for the developmental standards that, as I have shown throughout this project, organize the body along narrative lines. Hazel is not just a queer figure,

but something of a “dead end.” Not only is she non-reproductive, and non-heteronormative, but she literally ends her life, and, thereby, John Shade’s genealogical line. “Pale Fire” describes her parents’ despondence over her lack of heterosexual magnetism, as they console themselves, “Virgins have written some *resplendent* books./Lovemaking is not everything” (44). This queer figure refuses “redemption” in the form of heterosexual *or homosexual* reproductivity, and she thereby refuses to enter the telic logic that Disa and Sybil do, wherein ejaculation/creativity must have an ultimate, recognizable, and definable “purpose.” Hazel’s refusal, or failure, as it were, also means that this figure queers the logic of developmentalism that theorists such as Freud helped usher in. (Perhaps not coincidentally, then, Freud, psychoanalysis, and developmentalism make several appearances in *Pale Fire*.⁴⁵) Like Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding*, Hazel’s body is both out of time, and timeless. She is “wise and soured beyond [her] years” (Galef 422); Shade writes of her appearing in a play “as Mother Time,/A bent charwoman with slop pail and broom (44), while her classmates perform as fairies and elves. But her body is also poised to go nowhere, and thus is non-narrative by heterosexual standards: as Shade writes, “Alas, the dingy cygnet never turned/Into a wood duck” (422). Hazel thus shows the difficulties – and the radicalism – inherent in interrogating the connection between narrative and (heteronormative) developmentalism: while narrativizing one’s life may, in theory, impose coherent shape on it, not all persons fit within that schema. As Patrick O’Donnell asserts,

The whole of *Pale Fire* is a “lane,” line, or “inky maze” ... – a tracing of “the long ribbon of a man’s life,” but hardly the “crooked made straight,” or the “Daedalian plan simplified,” as Kinbote hopes his commentary will make Shade’s poem. Instead, as variant, translation, and labyrinth, the novel mixes the interweaving “voices” of Kinbote and Shade; it skews the “one beautiful straight line” and reveals the fictionalized, textual

self as a collation of incongruities and specious similarities. (394)

Pale Fire specifically skews that “beautiful straight line” by imagining something more complex than sperm that travels along straight (heterosexual) lines, something more complicated than the expected trajectory of biological reproduction, and something more queer than a beginning-middle-end to one’s development.

It is not surprising, then, that Kinbote speaks of Hazel Shade so fondly; she does not correspond to the validating logic of same-sex paternity that he initially embraces – validating the existence of his “homosexual” reproductive powers by searching for himself within Shade’s poem. She ultimately refuses to *make meaning* by “lovemaking,” to use Shade’s term. Likewise, it is no wonder that Kinbote claims “she resembled [him] in certain respects” (193). In no temporal or genealogical way does such a statement make sense. But *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* is precisely invested in providing us with a nonsensical temporality and genealogy, wherein individuals collaborate after death, wherein individuals refuse to care about future posterity, and wherein “parents” do not seek to ascertain their presence in “offspring.” Writing of *Pale Fire*’s collapse of binaries, Miller concludes that

the seeming distinction between ... the cultured and the barbarous, the homosexual and the heterosexual, and the roughly masculine and the decadently effeminized, appear to be nothing more than the product of an obsessive and pedantic imagination which insists on impressing its own absurdly reductive schema on a disorderly world that consistently eludes it. (85)

We might say that the same thing happens with paternity and posterity in *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*. Searching for paternity and posterity become, ultimately, ways of imposing a system of meaning-making on sex, a way of justifying pleasure and containing bodies, and insisting that

ejaculate – that directionless, liquid substance – come to a definitive end in the female body, or in narrative poetry.

“Beautiful Variant[s]”⁴⁶

Kinbote’s treatment of the poem’s variants corresponds directly to the idea of “useless,” yet cared-for, ejaculate. In the Foreword, he displays an initial insistence on the poem’s finiteness, which is immediately countered by an interest in its “excess” variants. As he writes,

The imputations made ... [by] one of our professed Shadeans – who affirmed *without having seen the manuscript of the poem* that it “consists of disjointed drafts none of which yields a definitive text” – is a malicious invention on the part of those who would wish ... to asperse the competence ... of its present editor. (14)

But just a page later Kinbote speaks of 12 notecards that Shade saved, referring to the

unused felicities shining among the dross of used draftings. Perhaps, he vaguely expected to replace certain passages in the Fair Copy with some of the lovely rejections in his files, or, more probably, a sneaking fondness for this or that vignette, suppressed ... because it had annoyed Mrs. S., urged him to put off its disposal till the time when the marble finality of an immaculate typescript would have ... made the most delightful variant seem cumbersome and impure. (16)

Kinbote’s insistence on the poem’s completeness, then, is clearly a direct reaction to homophobic resistance to his editorship – one that, at the same time, valorizes that which is in excess of that poem.

In fact, in reading the latter passage carefully, we see that Kinbote imparts to the reader both the delights and threats of variants and, thereby, of “useless” sexual excretions. To begin with, the diction in the passage evokes ejaculation – “shining” reminds us of the substance’s

visual properties (Aristotle described semen as “white, hot, shiny, and foamy,” according to Aydemir [xxi]), while “felicities” reminds us of ejaculation’s connection with pleasure. But the passage also evokes fears around *queer* ejaculation in particular, showing how queer bodies are figured as contaminated and contaminating. First, Kinbote indicates that a solid (“marble”) typescript stands in contrast to the fluid (“unused”) variant. Importantly, “immaculate” – used to describe the typescript – is not merely an antonym of “impure;” it is an antonym of “maculate.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “maculate” means “spotted” or “stained” *as well as* “impure;” the term connotes both liquid and contamination. While liquids and stains are not necessarily evocative of ejaculate, we should note that the text contains several sexualized references to staining, such as when a marginal young male character, modeled on the catamites of ancient Greece, attempts to seduce Kinbote’s assassin on a “collapsible mattress with a dark stain on its orange nylon” (200). And, of course, we must recall the fact that Kinbote records his memory of his first sexual encounter with a boy using the phrase “[the] structure and maculation [of this detailed recollection]” (127). Moreover, it is a figure of heterosexual control, “Mrs. S[hade],” who objects to the existence of such “impure” variants, at least in Kinbote’s understanding. *Pale Fire* thereby makes clear the link between “unused” ejaculate, textual variants, and perceived moral corruption.

Such passages also remind us that writing is, itself, queer and unstable – perhaps explaining the modern critical preoccupation with seeking the “ultimate truth” behind a work of art, or uncovering the “real” version of a text. Drawing on Calvin Thomas, Aydemir notes that “writing is both act and appearance, both process and material result ... ‘Masculinity cannot represent its supposedly immaculate self-construction ... without giving itself over to discursive productions in which the always potentially messy question of the body cannot fail to emerge.’”

... In writing ... masculinity becomes graphic in its double sense: both inscribed and bodily explicit, messy” (xiii). The term “(im)maculate” is common to both *Pale Fire* and this account of semen’s cultural resonance – linking, as it does, liquidity with deviance, and normalcy with “unspottedness” and solidity. In the terms outlined by both Thomas and *Pale Fire*, writing and ejaculation are not just “like each other,” and do not simply bear *the same implications*; they are ideologically inseparable. It is no wonder, then, that, in *Pale Fire*, images of writing slip so easily into images of ejaculation. Both writing and ejaculation have the potential to solidify into a finished product, or to wallow in variants and “misfires.” And both, therefore, have the ability to either underscore the powers of masculine creativity, or put those powers in doubt.

Kinbote’s valorization of the textual variant provides for us a model of radical queer interaction and (pro)creation. Having accepted that his “saturation” is contingent, not teleological, Kinbote here dethrones “saturation” at large from its status as *that which heads toward creation*. While the “stain” of ejaculation might be said to crystallize like, or crystallize *into*, the “stain” of writing, Kinbote’s insistence on unstable variants, and his constant invocation of ejaculation that goes nowhere, unsettles such understandings. Indeed, *writing itself* is resignified through *Pale Fire*: whereas Jacques Derrida has noted that writing (though not to be confused with authorship itself) is considered inferior to speech, insofar as it is understood as the destruction of presence,⁴⁷ Kinbote’s critical edition operates from a wholly different epistemology. Like *Silverlake Life*, it emphasizes the interaction that a written text can both commemorate, and perpetually occasion. Moreover, the critical edition critiques the strict difference between absence and presence, insofar as neither the body of the desired, nor the body of the collaborator, is necessary for production to go on.

And in this framework, semen can be seen as atemporal, non-directional – something that

mass culture constantly militates against in its discussions of sperm “swimming” toward a goal, and, ideally, penetrating that goal. Lisa Jean Moore has shown that, as such discussions figure sperm as productive and powerful, that same figuring means that “wasteful” ejaculation is pathologized: analyzing turn-of-the-century work on semen and criminology, she finds that “by implying that semen becomes less strong and substantial when it is spilled or wasted, virility is tied here to the notion of strength and morality. Conversely, it is also implied that wasting sperm is a sign of moral shortcomings or outright deviance. [Such thinking] is not merely a historical relic; the idea appears repeatedly in popular representations” (129). Kinbote at first fears this “wastefulness,” as we have already seen – while he thought that Shade would have been “bursting with his Zembla,” he instead finds the poem “drained of every trace of the material I contributed,” and his “saturation” ineffectual. But to valorize the presence of this “saturation” in the *variants*, which do not constitute the “real,” finished poem, is to shift our attention from linearity to excess – in short, from the useful to the wasteful.⁴⁸ As Kinbote writes, “*perhaps*, [Shade] *vaguely* expected to replace certain passages” (15, my emphasis) – as *Silverlake Life* also prompts us to say, who knows, who cares? These conceptual shifts invoke the decoupling of sexuality from reproduction that marks the period of the 1960s in the West, and indicate how that decoupling might help liberate textuality as well. Just as, in *The Member of the Wedding*, the lack of forward movement in a pubertal body makes us rethink the assumed purpose of changes such as menstruation, so do the philosophies put forth in *Pale Fire* make us scrutinize the assumed purpose of ejaculation – and what we mean by such terms as “usefulness,” “completeness,” and “meaning.”

Including problematic variants within his critical edition – as we have just seen, Kinbote is barely interested in conjecturing about Shade’s plans for these variants, and his interest in

them centers on the fact that they are totally ancillary to the “finished” poem – also allows Kinbote, via Nabokov, to once again intervene in the politics of criticism and textuality. These variants are not examined with an eye toward “recovering” the “real” poem, or the “real” intent of the author as to the final product – the project that textual scholarship, and much literary criticism, are frequently engaged in. As G. Thomas Tanselle explains, “textual scholarship is concerned with establishing what particular writers intended to have in the texts of their writings at particular times” (30). While Kinbote’s might be an extreme case of editorial bias, he nonetheless suggests that critics and curators can never simply “deliver” or “reveal” the text to us; they actually co-produce it with the often-deceased author. The fact that the text destabilizes epistemology in this queer way renders even further dubious such claims as that “there is also the ‘original’ text of ‘Pale Fire,’ but by the time we read it, its originality has been translated into the secondariness of commentary by Kinbote” (O’Donnell 402). Again, things look quite different when we take *Pale Fire*’s contents at face value: there literally is no such thing as the original “Pale Fire.” If we seek to know it at all, we cannot know it without Kinbote’s critical edition. At the same time, the stated contingency of this edition – the poem literally falls into Kinbote’s hands as Shade dies – reminds us that each edition of a work produces a different work, just as each reading produces a different work, each of which can be valuable in its own right. In this way, *Pale Fire* highlights its own subjective nature, as does *Silverlake Life: depending on circumstances, they could have been another way*. And this move eats at the contract of realism – at the insistence that, even though we may be treated to information via a narrator or filmmaker, there is *a* story that simply exists, *a* reality to be imparted; things are not contingent or constructed. Just as *Silverlake Life* asserts verbally and ontologically that there could instead be countless *Silverlake Lifes*, so there could be countless *Pale Fires: The Critical Editions*.

In considering “Pale Fire’s” poetic variants, it is interesting to note that many critics insist that *Pale Fire* the novel must itself have a unified, explicatory design, with no “loose ends.” (This insistence seems to sustain the veritable industry built up around unearthing references and glossing imagery in the novel.⁴⁹) And no wonder: the dream of such impenetrable design is precisely what instantiates the myth of the solitary genius. Consider Peggy Ward Corn’s statement that “Nabokov is the god who contrives coincidences which are evidence of his own grand design of correspondences in the novel” (89).⁵⁰ In such a framework, admitting that *Pale Fire* the novel, like “Pale Fire” the poem, may simply contain dead ends, false leads, or throwaway references would be to doubt Nabokov’s genius; even those “stray” strands must be accounted for somehow. But variants oppose the very concept of “design:” they are supplements, extras that call intentionality into question by installing contingency and randomness in its place. As Kinbote muses over a “beautiful variant, with one curious gap,” “Was Shade confronted by too much variety with nothing to help logic choose and so left a blank, relying upon the mysterious organic force that rescues poets to fill it in at its own convenience?” (168).

The very issue of variants – both in the general sense of variation, and in the literary sense – raises the issue of *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*’s posterity, which few critics have addressed. While *Pale Fire* the novel has reached us, the status of the intratextual *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* is totally unclear. Are we supposed to believe that it will actually be published, reaching the masses just as *Silverlake Life*’s considerations of collaboration and contamination eventually did? Do Kinbote’s occasional references to readers mark it as a viable future-text – or do they mark it as one that will never leave the hands of its mad curator? Nabokov does not give us sufficient information to answer any of these queries definitively. Thus, we realize that, just as Joslin and Massi loosen their grip on posterity by leaving the issue of audience open-ended,

Kinbote concentrates more on the experience of preparing *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition*, and thereby commemorating his interaction with Shade, than he does on the manuscript's ultimate fate. This lack of concern for posterity mirrors Kinbote's ultimate lack of concern for paternity; recall that Kinbote says that, after his initial shock of finding the poem "drained" of his influence, he

reread 'Pale Fire' more carefully. I liked it better when expecting less. And what was that? What was that dim distant music, those vestiges of color in the air? ... I now felt a new, pitiful tenderness toward the poem as one has for a fickle young creature who has been stolen and brutally enjoyed by a black giant but now again is safe in our hall and park ... The spot still hurts, it must hurt, but with strange gratitude we kiss those heavy wet eyelids and caress that polluted flesh. (297)

Kinbote's references here are rather bizarre, but the gist is clear; he cares for the poem, here figured as a child of some sort, better when expecting less from it – expecting less of his own self in it, and perhaps expecting less of a predetermined fate for it. While the "flesh" of the poem might therefore be "polluted" – marked by its sexual infidelity and its infidelity to an idea, muddied by the existence of multiple progenitors – it is beloved nonetheless.

When we consider how paternity and posterity are at-once biological/literal and discursive/figurative within contemporary culture, and when we consider the fact that the text critically navigates this matrix through the image of male ejaculate, it becomes particularly clear that *Pale Fire* has an intervention to make into the contemporary crises of masculinity and reproductivity – those that were only beginning to emerge at the time of its publication. Kinbote reminds us, indeed, of some of the options Moore outlines in her chapter, "The Future of Sperm": "how might fathers remake their identity without sperm? One outcome would be a more

expansive notion of fatherhood, not reliant on a known genetic connection with offspring ... Some men might even fake being ‘real’ dads, perhaps creating even more secrets about how reproduction occurs” (153). Kinbote, here, acts as a “real” dad to the “polluted flesh” of a poem whose “ultimate” authorship is endlessly debatable. His curatorial philosophy, then, both responds to the heteronormative insistence on how reproduction *should* occur, while providing us with a fantastical, secretive version of how it *could* occur: we might care more by simply caring less.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with the observation that many critics take authorship within *Pale Fire* as a mystery to be solved, and, in so doing, invoke the “problem” of the sexually, economically, and creatively parasitic queer. This approach, and the obliviousness that attends it, maintain classical realist narrative’s normalizing powers. When we take *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* as a realist narrative, we believe that we can “find” its “real” author; in turn, “finding” the “real” author becomes an exercise in decrying contamination and valorizing singular male creativity. Thus, when Brian Boyd – a critic who, like Ramey, approaches *Pale Fire* like a detective – explains that his work “begins with Kinbote’s self-obsessed behavior as editor, which it sets against Shade’s search for self-transcendence as a poet, and does not refer at all to Kinbote’s sexual orientation” (179), his (implied) abhorrence of homophobia is disingenuous. It is disingenuous not because it necessarily disguises some personal (homophobic) politics on Boyd’s part, but because it refuses to admit what *Pale Fire* has shown us: that, while discussions of “self-obsessed behavior,” of editorship, of authorship, and of textuality, can pretend to be uninterested in “sexual orientation,” those issues *are* precisely issues of sexual orientation, in modern Western culture. Moreover, such perspectives in turn fail to see how *Pale Fire*

intervenes at that juncture, making for bodily transformativity new standards, and for textual production new paradigms. Interestingly, then, “the inevitable difficulties brought about if we persist in regarding *Pale Fire* as a novel” (Riemer 41) are actually largely solved through the pro-singular, heternormative concept of the author: one just has to make a reasonable case for the “proper” figure.

I have argued here, in contrast, that we might take seriously the fact that *Pale Fire* the novel contains little else than something we might call *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* – a text that binds together a foreword, a poem, commentary, and an index. I have, further, described how these sections counter the insistence upon traditional reproduction, finished products over collaboration, posterity over interaction, individual male sovereignty, and the teleology that structures both human bodies and narratives. We might then ask one of two questions: But doesn’t such a text have an end? Or, in another spirit, How *to* end such a text? We might note, first, that the unique status of *Pale Fire*, “A Novel by Vladimir Nabokov,” as an ephemeral frame for *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* means that, theoretically, what we have in our hands is the paradox of a published novel whose contents are unfinished. That is, what we actually *read* is an *unpublished* critical edition – though, of course, a fictional one. But on the formal, not just conceptual, level, it is also difficult to claim that *Pale Fire* has an end. What we are left with, after the Foreword, poem, and Commentary, is an index: a massive set of references and terms that send us back into, rather than escorting us out of, the text. The entries in the index refer to both Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary, thus sealing together both items. Further, one of the last phrases glossed in the index is the phrase “Word Golf,” a pastime in which players substitute letters until new words are made. Following the instructions, the reader moves from “lass” to “mass” to “mars,” to “mare,” and finally to “male,” before ending up back at “Word

Golf.” She has herself enacted the textual process of creating repetition with a difference, of creating not sameness but difference out of a non-teleological queer dialectic: the nearly effortless transformation of female (“lass”) to male, and back again, ad infinitum.

While the fate of *Pale Fire: The Critical Edition* is ultimately unknowable within the diegesis – just as *Silverlake Life*’s makers figured their audience as unpredictable – not to mention irrelevant within the “real world,” something interesting happens when we consider the ultimate fate of *Pale Fire*, the novel by Nabokov. Writing in 1967, Andrew Riemer claims,

“Pale Fire” [the novel], like “Gulliver’s Travels,” like “Tristram Shandy” and “Finnegan’s Wake,” or perhaps even Burton’s “Anatomy,” cannot be a seminal influence leading to a new and viable literary tradition – such works are capable of producing only facile imitation. Nevertheless, frequently they possess stature as isolated yet magnificent ... works of considerable value. “Pale Fire” is most assuredly one such work. (48, my emphasis)

Riemer’s biological/reproductive diction here is almost surely unintentional, but rather striking. *Pale Fire* is a work of a solitary genius, “isolated,” and “magnificent.” And yet, even though it escapes a fate of *being* a simulacra or copy, in its originality, it might *produce* degraded copies or imitations rather than “true” offspring. And yet it is also sterile – it cannot be “seminal,” it cannot lead to a “viable ... tradition.” In writing of Marx and Freud, both of whom Nabokov publicly despised (Marx, like Freud, is also lampooned in *Pale Fire*⁵¹), Foucault notes that “the distinctive contribution of these authors is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts ... they both established the endless possibility of discourse” (131). It is appropriate then, that in the final analysis, Nabokov’s novel is nothing, genealogically-speaking, like the work of his nemeses. It can, and has, occasioned

endless instances of interaction and collaboration: reams of criticism that partially produce “new” *Pale Fires* in our minds; bitter ongoing feuds such as that between Kevin Ohi and Brian Boyd that fill journal page upon journal page.⁵² But like the “pale fire” of Charles Kinbote’s inspirational saturation, and like ejaculate in a queer economy, this *Pale Fire* doesn’t quite “go anywhere”: it makes for no future; no formulation of other texts in its tradition; no products – only process.

We might make a somewhat different claim for *Silverlake Life*’s afterlife, but one that nonetheless resonates with *Pale Fire*. Because of its unique production conditions, *Silverlake Life* exists as a kind of phantasmic double of itself – a prospect that gives us a new form for film that is not a form at all; one that is, therefore, not bound by temporality. Simply put, “*Silverlake Life*” takes on two different meanings, which Peter Friedman indicates in his comments on the airplane. To repeat: he states, “for *Silverlake Life* to have any impact, it had to be completed.” This comment speaks, again, to the demand for coherent form, for “wieldyness,” in a final product. But it also, strangely, presumes the existence of a *Silverlake Life* beyond the borders of *Silverlake Life* as such – a presumption that echoes an earlier comment of Joslin’s, made while he is also, as Friedman is here, looking out an airplane window. While flying to New Hampshire, Joslin remarks, “*Silverlake Life* normally takes place in Silverlake, California, but in the end it goes where I go.” Together, these statements posit a film that is not at all alike in status to the final, finished product we watch on DVD or VHS – it is one caught between imagination (Joslin’s fantasy of the project) and existence (the video footage Joslin produces); it is one continuously produced, not a product.

This phantasmic double does away with the multiple cinematic removes I have cataloged.

There is no object to remind us of absence, no text whose ending will leave us grieving. While this concept is a psychic compensation, it accords with Joslin's spirit: the specter of death raised by AIDS prompted him not simply to *make a film*, but to *imagine a film whose end could not be seen*. After all, to say that *Silverlake Life* "goes where [he] goes" is to suggest that a *Silverlake Life* exists somewhere beyond the grave. Death may have occasioned *Life*, but it does not define its shape – in the ways that, as Peter Brooks and others have argued, death casts meaning over events and renders them narrative.⁵³ Rather, death actually *resists* a definitive ending, not least in that it occasions posthumous interaction. Moreover, while, as Foucault notes, the concept of *écriture* (advanced by Derrida) "proclaims the survival of the work as a kind of enigmatic supplement of the author beyond his own death" (120), this supplementariness is actually rendered moot when the work – and, in retrospect, the body – are never conceived of as capable of finitude in the first place. Of course, neither thing is wholly possible from a medical, pragmatic, or "realistic" standpoint: death still ends life, "real" films will still have endings. But we as viewers nonetheless confront the possibility of another, non-material dimension, one of a *Silverlake Life* with no end, and bodies that do not die.⁵⁴

Notes

¹ As Kevin Ohi avers, “critics ... align sexual faults with critical ones, and writers other than [Brian] Boyd have also curiously coupled homosexuality with Kinbote’s critical excesses” (155). As I argue in this chapter, this coupling is not “curious” at all from the standpoint of heteronormativity. Ohi goes on to discuss David Galef’s work as an example. Jean Walton’s article, “Dissenting in an Age of Frenzied Heterosexuality,” provides an even more elaborate catalog of homophobic responses to the character of Kinbote.

² As Lisa Jean Moore summarizes, “In *The Decline of Males*, Lionel Tiger, an anthropologist who coined the term ‘male bonding’ in the 1960s ... explores how the birth control pill, women’s role in the labor market, abortion, reproductive technology, and single motherhood have cut men out of reproduction: ‘This book is clearly about an emerging pattern ... It is the pattern of growth in the confidence and power of men. More women are having children without men, and therefore men are without the love of families’” (42).

³ In particular, I am thinking of the long history of sexology’s linkage of narcissism and onanism to homosexuality.

⁴ See Ohi and Walton; see also Eric Naiman’s “Hermophobia (On Sexual Orientation and Reading Nabokov).”

⁵ Baudrillard’s preferred term is “reproduction,” which he opposes to the earlier-order “production.” I use “replication” instead so as to avoid confusion; from a biological standpoint, “reproduction” is actually of the highest creative order, combining as it does two sets of material to make a wholly unique being.

⁶ No relation to the actor of the same name featured in *Safe*.

⁷ B. Ruby Rich is responsible for this playful formulation, as well as for the phrase “New Queer Cinema.”

⁸ Bill Nichols has catalogued the affinities between the experience of viewing a classical narrative film and that of viewing a documentary. As he argues, “documentary film may not provide as direct or scenic a route to the unconscious as most fiction does. Documentary films, though, are part and parcel of the discursive formations, the language games, and rhetorical stratagems by and through which pleasure and power, ideologies and utopias, subjects and subjectivities receive tangible representation” (10).

⁹ I am indebted to Ross Chambers’s *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author* for this insight. As he argues, “such diaries always come to an end, of course, but they do so without concluding: there is just a final entry, followed by a white space ... Thus, their end, in spite of the author’s death that it signifies, remains *suspended*” (7). While I agree with Chambers’s claim in general, it must be noted that *Silverlake Life* does not actually stop with Joslin’s death or Massi’s. (Massi’s passing, in fact, is not shown on tape at all.)

¹⁰ As I will discuss, most critics ignore Friedman’s role in favor of discussing the original videotape footage that he curated. Chambers states, “completed by Peter Friedman, the video is *nonetheless* a remarkable instance of the autobiographical genre” (61, my emphasis). Admitting that the film is *both* biography and autobiography does not, I argue, mean we lose anything – as Chambers seems to fear. In fact, as my analysis shows, looking at the biographical aspects of *Silverlake* can make clear for us the very issues that the film works through.

¹¹ Beverly Seckinger and Janet Jakobsen also note that “Joslin and Massi’s primary authorship during the shooting phase was supplemented by the camera work of other friends, especially ... Elaine Mayes” (145); Mayes is given camera operating credit along with Massi, Joslin, and Friedman.

¹² In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault uses the term “genealogy” to mean a kind of *queer* genealogy – a model for looking at history, events, and subjecthood in ways that are neither teleological nor deterministic. As he states, “genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or, conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is

to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents” (146).

¹³ Wollen notes that the original formulation was “*politique de auteurs*,” Andrew Sarris is responsible for the phrase “auteur theory.” See Sarris’s *The American Cinema* (1968).

¹⁴ Chambers ruminates on how AIDS “writes itself” onto the body through the lesion – and, in turn “writes ‘homosexuality’” onto that body, from a homophobic standpoint. In addition, he ventures that “AIDS ... will have been ... an epidemic of rhetorical anxiety” – “will the representation of my dying, can it, find a readership capable of ensuring its survival? asks the author. Does my survivorhood necessarily disqualify me as an adequate respondent to a text that bears witness, in its unlimited readability, to the fact of death? asks the reader” (79). I discuss some answers to these questions in what follows.

¹⁵ Peggy Phelan notes that “the announcement of [AIDS] contains within it the question of the cause: How and when was I infected?” (159), and she also notes that *Silverlake Life* interrogates causality by questioning the assumed connections among life, health, illness, and death. However, she does not explore the extent to which the film refuses to foreground the issue of Joslin’s and Massi’s respective infections.

¹⁶ Seckinger and Jakobsen write, “When Friedman took over the film, he obtained a commitment for broadcast on Channel 4 in England at an early stage of the editing. He realized, he says in interviews, that *Silverlake Life* would thereby become one of the most in-depth portraits to date of what it is like to live with AIDS to be seen by a large, often largely uninformed, audience” (146).

¹⁷ In his article, “*Zero Patience*, Genre, Difference, and Ideology: Singing and Dancing Queer Nation,” Christopher Gittings describes “the American print and electronic media’s transformation of an HIV-infected French Canadian, Gaetan Dugas, into a promiscuous gay serial killer, Patient Zero, whom the media claimed infected the North American continent with the AIDS virus” (28-9).

¹⁸ As I will discuss later on, while we *do* know that Friedman is the ultimate editor, it is impossible to tell if, for example, a certain cut was made by him, or if it existed in the original video footage.

¹⁹ HIV is, in many instances, now considered a chronic disease, whereas it was once always progressive.

²⁰ A 1989 survey found that 20 percent of college students did not know if AIDS could be contracted through kissing (<http://www.nursinglibrary.org/Portal/main.aspx?pageid=4024&sid=4262>). In a 2005 interview with George Stephanopoulos, Republican senator Bill Frist repeatedly declined to state whether or not bodily fluids such as sweat and tears could transmit the HIV virus (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A48119-2005Mar18.html>).

²¹ In general, Susan Sontag notes that “there is a link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness. It lies perhaps in the very concept of wrong, which is archaically identical with the non-us, the alien. A polluting person is always wrong, as Mary Douglas has observed. The inverse is also true: a person judged to be wrong is regarded as, at least potentially, a source of pollution” (136). More specifically, as regards AIDS, the disease has been traced back to Africa at its earliest origins, and, as noted, to a French Canadian “Patient Zero,” in terms of its entry to North America; whether accurate or not, these “discoveries” are laden with xenophobia and even racism.

²² See *Totality and Infinity* (1961), in which Levinas discusses the encounter with the Other who can never be fully known, but whose existence is continually pressing.

²³ See *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

²⁴ See *The Imaginary Signifier* (1977), which I discuss later in this chapter.

²⁵ Massi takes over for Joslin completely when the latter falls very ill, and then dies, but Friedman then takes over for both, interviewing Mark, producing the shots that establish his surrogacy of the film, and providing voiceover.

²⁶ I have already noted the fact that only *after* the establishment of the biographical (Friedman's curation) do we see the autobiographical footage (Joslin and Massi filming themselves).

²⁷ This music appears in the first few minutes of the film, and never reappears; the rest of the film contains only diegetic sound.

²⁸ This fact is cited in Ehrenstein's interview with Friedman, full text of which can be found at <http://www.strange-attractions.com/films/silverlake-life/la-times-interview/>.

²⁹ According to critics including Phelan, Joslin's instructions included his desire to have the video footage transferred to film.

³⁰ Nichols observes, "realism has been such a widespread and pervasive influence that it fails to offer a particularly distinctive foothold for documentary analysis" (22). Moreover, he notes that "realism provides unproblematic access to the world through traditional physical representations and the untroubled transference of psychological states from character to viewer (by means of acting style, narrative structure, and cinematic techniques such as point-of-view shots). Reflexive documentaries will employ such techniques only to interrupt and expose them" (57).

³¹ Amy Reading facetiously summarizes, "*Pale Fire*'s scholars have divided neatly down the middle between those who believe Shade authored the entire text and those who side with Kinbote, bedeviled by a radical fringe who maintain that the novel's author is Vladimir Nabokov" (85). In *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999), Boyd advances his argument about Hazel's involvement.

³² I therefore agree with the first, but not the second, part of Haegert's statement: "whether in the last analysis we regard *Pale Fire* primarily as a novel or as a metafiction, it is clearly of the first importance that we always see it as the thing it pretends to be: a scholarly edition that is designed to elucidate a poem, *but which scandalously falls apart as a result of its editor's gross ineptitude and indefatigable egotism*" (414, emphasis mine). The second, I believe, does not follow from the first.

³³ We could say that *Pale Fire* reverses this scenario, with Shade the one always under surveillance by Kinbote.

See also Robert Corber's *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (1993).

³⁴ According to Moore, "in the United States, the first documented semen bank began in 1950 at the University of Iowa. These early banks were exclusively part of the university system until the early 1970s. The university provided the materials, funding, and legitimacy to further explore, research, and develop clinical applications, leading to the first work on humans in 1954" (97).

³⁵ Walton claims that, "precisely by exploring *Pale Fire* as being, in some crucial ways, about its protagonist's (proscribed) homoerotic desire, we might see how the novel resists and is complicit with the way sexuality is constructed in twentieth-century Western culture" (89).

³⁶ I do not mean to suggest that *any* criticism of Kinbote is homophobic. In fact, I find it undeniable that Nabokov has fashioned a character who is at once narcissistic, delusional, and queer. But focusing on this aspect keeps us from theorizing the ways in which homosexuality presents itself as the "enemy" of the modern concept of the author.

³⁷ See page 241.

³⁸ See Fredric Jameson's essay "Periodizing the '60s.'"

³⁹ Aydemir is here citing Aristotelian beliefs. We might better rephrase his statement as, "*even if* we think of semen as the substance that issues from the solid penis to generate the equally solid product, the child, ... the substance itself does not fit into that economy of solidity."

⁴⁰ One could, of course, imagine that “swallow” is a noun, meant to signify the bird. In any case, considering Kinbote’s hatred of Sybil, his sexual phobia of women, and his insistence on process over product when it comes to “Pale Fire,” the more crude connotation of ingestion cannot but crop up.

⁴¹ The Pill was introduced in 1960.

⁴² Moreover, this one seed was not believed to need anything other than a bed in which to grow; it already contained the full measure of one *being*. As Moore notes, “many of the earliest sperm scientists ... envisioned semen as the key to reproduction: sperm was *a cell that embodied a preformed individual*. These scientists marveled at the sperm cells’ powerful agency and *self-contained role in reproduction*” (16, my emphasis). Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas were two such “scientists” – “according to Aquinas, who was greatly influenced by Aristotle, semen’s intention is to produce a replica of itself, a male” (Moore 20).

⁴³ Michael Trask helpfully limns this paradox in stating, “if classical sexology tacitly construed homosexuality as a category of bourgeois identity, as some historians have argued, it bears noting how for [sexologist Havelock] Ellis that customary mapping of the homosexual self appears implicated in something of a class betrayal. Sexologists frequently represent nonnormative sexual desires in terms of a trespassing of class boundaries in which the lower-class other becomes the dangerous catalyst of, for example, the ‘homosexual impulse’” (33).

⁴⁴ Ward Corn makes an interesting point in stating, “Julian Moynahan points out that from his first line [of the poem ‘Pale Fire’], Shade ‘casts his poem as a retrospection from the realm of death.’ Each canto meditates on death and the possibility of an afterlife for his daughter and himself” (86). (That first line is, “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain.”) Thus, we might say that Shade’s poem confuses life and death from the start – while Kinbote thinks of him as a quasi-living collaborator after his death, Shade positions himself in the realm of the afterlife while still alive.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the variant quoted on page 94, which states, “Your modern architect/Is in collusion with psychoanalysts [*sic*]/When planning parents’ bedrooms, he insists/On lockless doors so that, when looking back/The future patient of the future quack/May find, all set for him, the Primal Scene.”

⁴⁶ See page 167.

⁴⁷ See *Of Grammatology*.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to consider here Elizabeth D. Harvey’s survey of the clitoris’s non-narrativity: “Noting that male and female pleasure are asymmetrical, [Gayatri Spivak] argues that the clitoris escapes ‘reproductive framing’ ... Its ‘effacements,’ both physical and symbolic ... within a reproductive economy situate the clitoris as excessive, supernumerary, an organ without a function or utility, designed purely for pleasure, a ‘waste’ principle within a capitalist economy” (321).

⁴⁹ Picking up any issue of the journal *The Nabokovian*, one finds such articles as “*Macbeth in Pale Fire*” (Ward Swinson, issue 46) or “*Pale Fire and the Life of Johnson: The Case of Hodge and Mystery Lodge*” (Gerald deVries, issue 26).

⁵⁰ Reading notes, “Nabokov’s literary critics assume *a priori* that the novel stands at the pinnacle of literary achievement” (80). It is also interesting to note here Barthes’s comment that “refusing to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text ... liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law” (146).

⁵¹ Kinbote states, “the respective impacts and penetrations of Marxism and Freudism [*sic*] being talked of, I said, ‘The worst of two false doctrines is always that which is harder to eradicate.’ Shade: ‘No, Charlie, there are simpler criteria: Marxism needs a dictator, and a dictator needs a secret police, and that is the end of the world; but the Freudian, no matter how stupid, can still cast his vote at the poll, even if he is pleased to call it [*smiling*] *political pollination*’” (156).

⁵² See *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999), which contains Ohi's "Narcissism and Queer Reading in *Pale Fire*," and Boyd's response.

⁵³ See *Reading for the Plot*.

⁵⁴ In his article, "The Author as Reader as Nabokov," John Haegert suggests we experience *Pale Fire* as an experiment in how normative reading patterns may (or may not) force us to assimilate its non-sensical strands to a grand narrative. As he claims, "the ambiguities arising from Nabokov's art are real and undoubted. We may sympathize with those who have attempted to resolve them, but the two approaches to his work outlined above [seeing its characters as "full," and realist; and seeing the entire work as a formal exercise] have taken a confusing turn. Instead of rendering its mystery more accessible, many of the supposed 'reconstructions' of *Pale Fire* have only reduced and simplified the power and complexity of Nabokov's masterful imaginative achievement" (407). While I do not agree that a proliferation of meanings necessarily "simpli[fies]" Nabokov's work, the fact remains that seeing *Pale Fire* as a realist novel makes for endless games of spot-the-reference and pin-the-name-on-author.

Coda: Life without Puberty?

In Chapter 2, I made the following claim: “while it is impossible to stop a pubescent female body from undergoing certain somatic processes, at least in 1946, *The Member of the Wedding* shows us that it *is* possible to refuse to employ those transformations as the building blocks of a coherent narrative, one leading to the end of heterosexual, reproductive womanhood.” As I have remained skeptical throughout this project of dominant progress narratives and historical determinism, “at least in 1946” was not meant to signal the inexorable coming of a utopic sea change. All the same, I could not help but be struck by an article in the GLBT newsmagazine *The Advocate* that appeared as I was completing this work: one titled “Life without Puberty.”

This tantalizing title yielded some early reflections on the increased use of puberty-blocking hormones among transgendered youth. As the author, trans activist Andrea James, explained, “some transgender minors delay puberty until adulthood; others begin cross-sex hormones soon after starting hormone blockers while minors.”¹ These new regimens offer something slightly different than life without puberty, however.² According to James, three new trajectories open up for transgendered youth:

Transition before puberty: these people would have just one puberty, to their affirmed sex. Transition after medically delayed puberty: these people would have just one puberty, to their affirmed sex. Transition after onset of puberty: these people could be described as undergoing two puberties, or at least a partial initial puberty and a full second puberty. Since these puberties could be occurring concurrently, some instances might be better described as a double puberty. (personal correspondence)

These increased possibilities indicate that “the next big wave of the trans [social] movement

will be age at transition;” as James elaborates, “in the coming decades we’ll [likely] see very [few] people who transition midlife after a marriage and children, which used to be a common trajectory for gays and lesbians as well” (personal correspondence).

The equivocality of James’s terms, the ease with which figurative and induced puberties are grouped alongside “natural” puberty, is striking. Whereas the texts I treat in Chapters 2 and 3 indicate that puberty has been a circumscribed, tightly policed, and heteronormative standard since at least the turn of the twentieth century, James’s article elides this sociohistorical reality. However, we might see her as staking out a completely different epistemological field, one in which “natural” puberty, figurative puberty, and induced puberty all circulate as equivalent options.

And indeed, James’s statements, and the possibilities to which she refers, offer alternative ways to conceptualize the queer bodily transformation of transgenderism in particular, and human development in general. When “puberty” means a transition to one’s *affirmed* gender (e.g. maleness for a female-to-male child), rather than the evolution of one’s biological sex-and-gender, the process takes on quite different purchase: such an experience does not confirm the biological structures one was born with, giving them “final purpose.” It renders them incidental and even extraneous to a full human life, a literalization of the conceptual possibilities that *The Member of the Wedding* tenders. The induced, figurative, and “double” puberties James refers to also do not hold out the promise of normativizing that, as I have shown throughout this project, informs the idealized view of the process. And they offer the kind of self-determination so rarely afforded to adolescents or transpeople – not to mention those who fall under both categories, such as the young Jess Goldberg of *Stone Butch Blues*. Finally, the liminality that accrues to the adolescent body, as we saw in Chapter 2, is severely curtailed when one transitions as a child;

the “buildup” that makes adolescence a pivot, and that makes human development, in turn, a narrative of fulfillment, is thereby undercut.

All the same, we must note that even as James’s article does not address, much less challenge, the centrality of normative puberty – a centrality, we might say, that prevents figurative, induced, doubled, and otherwise queer transitions from being conceived of outside of the pubertal framework – its *title* cannily acknowledges it. “Life without Puberty” admits that puberty as we know it is simply not conducive to transgendered life – and, perhaps more primarily, that puberty as we know it is a cultural necessity; a fundamental, organizing social concept.

We must also note that such hormone regimens are unlikely to do away with the pervasive image of the transperson as a Western technomedical “accomplishment,” the image I critically explicate in Chapter 3. In fact, their popularity may very well rewrite such persons back into the narrative which positions the transgendered body as the object, not the subject, of medicalized discourse. Consider, for example, that the Web site for TransYouth Family Allies, an organization that prominently supports early hormone treatment, declares, “*Modern medicine has made it possible to delay the onset of puberty, which can be utterly devastating, in gender variant children*”³ (my emphasis) – utterly devastating, I would argue, because of the cultural insistence that puberty facilitates gender continuity, and prepares one for life as a heteroreproductive adult of the “same” gender.

Which brings us to an important point: it is tempting to assume that the possibilities James outlines will render obsolete the kinds of texts I have examined here, those that explore how dominant narrative and visual epistemologies establish and enforce particular expectations for bodies, for how they grow and change. But we might consider how the texts I have examined

chart the persistence and recurrence of modern expectations for humans even in postmodernity, and that they encourage us to be skeptical of strict historical periodicity: just as the “old” ideas about queer bodies showcased in *Pale Fire* recirculate with the advent of a devastating virus in *Silverlake Life*, and just as “old” racial prejudices and classist schemas attach themselves to contemporary environmental concerns in *Safe*, we can assume that future narratives of transgenderism will retain the traces of the stories that have long been told about, around, and by, these bodies. This is not to say that, if we *do* see a large-scale shift in transgender life trajectories, we will not begin to also see different kinds of trans stories being told. But it *is* to stake two particular claims: first, representing “bodily transformations” is not a matter of neutral reflection, as I have shown, just as telling stories constitutes more than simple reportage. Second, and more specifically, representing bodies at the limits of dominant vision and dominant narrative structure involves a multi-faceted negotiation with complex racial, sexual, gender, class, historiographic, and narratological politics – and analyzing these representations requires the same kind of multi-faceted approach.

The ongoing challenge, then, is to advance careful and nuanced analyses of the stories that do get told about bodily change, regardless of whether these stories are “queer” in spirit or not – analyses that remain sensitive to the potentials *and* the pitfalls of marking change. To wit: while the concept of stopping a pubescent body from undergoing puberty may indeed be aimed at preventing “utte[r] devastati[on]” for some gender variant children, it might have problematic implications for gender variant people across the globe – especially considering the fact that, as I have shown, the Western progress narrative in which medico-technological advancements “save” those in underdeveloped areas still dominates contemporary global culture. In other words, we should remain cognizant, as I insist in my introduction, of how that which appears queer can

ultimately underwrite hegemonic expectations.

That particular Western progress narrative, as I have argued, has been challenged by anticolonial texts such as *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Thus, in addition to the new narratives of bodily changeability that we might find in the future, we might also find new *counter*-narratives to nuance, parody, or probe them and their representational strategies – proving queer bodily transformativity to be a rich site indeed.

Notes

¹ The article appeared in the February 26, 2008 issue of *The Advocate* and is currently posted online at http://www.advocate.com/issue_story_ektid51685.asp.

The Web site for Trans Youth Family Allies (<http://imatyfa.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions/>) states, “These [puberty-blocking] medications are called GnRh analogues (puberty inhibitors) and are administered by an endocrinologist. The drugs prevent the devastating unwanted secondary sexual characteristics that occur during adolescence for children whose gender identity conflicts with their birth sex. These medications are reversible. ... Not all children express that they are trans or gender variant in time to delay puberty, and not all parents understand their child’s gender differences in time to delay puberty. If puberty has already begun, there may be medications that can help minimize the discomfort, such as, stopping menstruation. An endocrinologist can help with these issues, too.”

² Technically, life without puberty has long existed as a reality for persons with Kallman’s syndrome. In addition, *anyone* can delay puberty indefinitely with hormone blockers, regardless of gender identity; it is not clear that trans persons would seek to delay puberty forever at any greater rate than non-trans persons would.

³ See <http://imatyfa.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions/>.

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