

THE DEATH OF DIFFERENCE IN AMERICAN MODERNISM:

FAULKNER, BARNES, WEST

BY

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B.A., BOSTON COLLEGE, 1998

A.M., BOSTON COLLEGE 2000

A.M., BROWN UNIVERSITY 2005

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

MAY 2009

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This dissertation by Avak Hasratian is accepted in its present form
by the Department of English as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Advisor, Nancy Armstrong, who literally taught me how to write, and how to build systems using literature and theory. I am also grateful to my reader, Stuart Burrows, who taught me how to read closely, and my second reader, Timothy Bewes, who encouraged me to ignore stupidity and be as theoretical as possible. I would not have entered graduate school without the gentle prodding of Frances Restuccia, who made theory among the most pleasurable of experiences. Special thanks are due to Judith Feher-Gurewich, who helped me learn to adapt to life's changing circumstances, and to Michele Contreras, who reawakened in me the power of self-discipline and the reality principle, both of which, I had forgotten, are properties of consciousness. I cannot thank my parents, Tony and Paula Hasratian, enough—both for their emotional and financial support. My mother taught me that no one has to do what he or she doesn't want to do, and my father taught me to make every day count. Finally, I would like to thank my life partner, Christopher Verola, whose patience in seeing me through the completion of this project is well known to our pack. The high intellectual company he and I keep is rivaled only by the *jouissance* we take from the vulgar, which, in combination, make us so uncannily similar, we proved that it was possible to become what "I" write about: a multiple body.

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INTRODUCTION

Late Modernism and Multiplicity

Is it possible, or even desirable, to imagine human relations without any rules of kinship as anthropology or the novel—at least throughout the 1920s—has codified them? This dissertation considers such a possibility by reading novels that withhold kinship as the means of understanding human relationships without imposing such understanding as the absent or repressed key to the novels' organization. In reading for the social body that Michel Foucault calls a "living mass" or "man-as-species," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a "rhizome" or "multiplicity," Antonio Hardt and Michael Negri call a "multitude," and Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," I want to show how literature transforms the concept of a human being that rests on gendered, raced, and classed foundations. The European Enlightenment bequeathed to twentieth-century American culture the notion that collective humanity should be an aggregate of self-governing individuals who, in reproducing themselves, also perpetuate the aggregate, when in fact the Enlightenment transformed the multitude into a society of individuals. As I understand the history of medical, sexual, and population research over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at some point during that period, life itself, rather

than individuated subjects, became the object of political control. Power over life was consequently more important than the development of individuals or their ability to cohere as a group. Where modern societies understand themselves to be comprised of groups who reproduce themselves in terms of race, gender, and class, the concept of humanity *en masse* cancels out the categorical differences fundamental to both social and biological reproduction. In doing so, “mass man” also, as Foucault has declared, “completely reversed the system of values conveyed and laid down by the family” (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject* 96). Consequently, “mass man” creates new grounds for imagining the history of human social life without the family as its origin and end.

For Georg Lukács, the entrenchment within modernist literature of the self-enclosed bourgeois subject spells the end of the novel’s dialectical staging of the struggle between self and society. Indeed, he castigates modernism for killing off the historical novel and supplanting what he calls narratives of “change or development” with the “static apprehension” of “the individual’s subjectivity” (*Realism in Our Time* 36, 35, 38). The individual can only describe facets of its own life; its interaction with all things outside itself is meaningful only in terms of one mind housed in a single body. My reading of American late modernism together with such materials as the anthropology of alimentation and medical experimentation, theories of multiplicity, and print media and the public sphere, aims to show how such alternatives to the human individual as “mass man” emerge in fiction, allowing us to think about those alternatives as a different kind of social body, one based on the care and cultivation of the species-body, the life and death of the population, and the necessary interconnection of all life-forms. This other social body often appears in fiction in the form of masses, crowds, multitudes, species,

collective forms of thinking and embodiment, and populations. The novels on which I focus bring the isolated bourgeois subject face to face, not with a class or group—which often portrays humanity as something that can be contained within society and broken down into individuals—but with this historically new and distinctly modern mass body that resists the classification system we inherit from a belated Enlightenment.

Modernism's mass body takes up what Foucault calls "life as a political object ... and turned [it] back against the system that was bent on controlling it" (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* 145).

The modernism that took up life in such a way is not a monolithic Modernism, nor several modernisms, but a minor modernism. While scholars have demonstrated there are an extremely wide variety of modernisms¹ (which the scope of my study cannot cover), it is nevertheless possible to divide American modernism into two generations of fiction on the grounds of how each treats the individual. Tyrus Miller already has established a useful division between what he calls "earlier modernism"—generally modernism prior to World War I—and "late modernism" (63), by which he means fiction and art produced during the interwar years but particularly during the decade on which my project focuses: the 1930s. The "early period of modernism," he contends, is marked by "the autonomy of art *from* social norms" and "formal originality, which in turn was an index of the individual author's craft" and unique genius (28-29). Such writing united

¹ There are sexual modernisms, spatial-geographical modernisms, imperial and counter-imperial modernisms, anthropological modernisms, and metropolitan, global, and local or regional modernisms. In Tyrus Miller's terms, "[c]onceptions of modernism ... as even a limited survey will suggest, are shaped by factors that go well beyond narrowly aesthetic concerns. These may include, among a welter of other elements, particularities of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality; questions of political engagement; concrete experiences of wars and other historical events; developments in technology; and religious beliefs" (4).

art with the individual producing it. The “later modernist writers,” by contrast, reacted to their forbears and looked at “individual subjectivity ... with considerable ambivalence,” even questioning their own status as individuals and authors (40).²

Following Miller’s general division, we might say that Lukács is right about modernism, at least inasmuch as its first-generation incarnation was “obsess[ed] with psychopathology” (36). As Fredric Jameson contends, the “psychic fragmentation ... of the subject just as much as of the outside world” is the motor of both Freudian psychoanalysis and much of earlier modernist fiction, which takes up those fragments and makes them into the unique aspects of the consciousness of one character or the author who invents such a character (*The Political Unconscious* 62). While Jameson unearths those fragments for what they reveal about history and class consciousness, here my point is to distinguish the formal difference between earlier and later generations of modernism, because, I believe, those differences resist a reading in terms of class or any of the categories modern culture has bequeathed us for purposes of classifying individuals as groups.

In a lengthy footnote to his case of a patient haunted by the apparition of several wolves perched in a tree outside his window, Freud tries to count “[t]he wolves. Their number, *six or seven*. In the wolf story, there was a pack, and no number was given” (200). This suggests that a pack moves as a single entity and so cannot be broken down into individual members and be counted. Throughout his analysis of the patient, Freud finds such packs everywhere: in dreams, in “the picture of a wolf in a book of fairy

² Justus Nieland similarly shows how the sublime art of earlier modernism gave way to the ridiculous in late modernism by foregrounding laughter, gesture, repetition, automatism, and animation rather than individuality.

tales,” possibly ““Little Red Riding Hood”” (187), “large flocks” of sheep (188), another “story,” one “that [the patient] had heard his grandfather tell” about “a pack of wolves” (188), another fairy tale, ““The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats”” (189), observations of “sheep-breeding” (191), and many other figures of pack life. Freud ingeniously takes each subsequent addition to the pack, each contradictory aspect of all those wolves, sheep, tales, and tails, and turns them into a unified narrative traceable back to one lone wolf, a wolf “that was ... undoubtedly his [patient’s] father” (198). In being so hell-bent to deny that the Wolf Man himself is a pack of several (uncountable) wolves and consequently a perpetual disunity, Freud exposes the fact that his patient is indeed such a pack. In order to reconcile the contradictions generated by his interpretation, Freud makes all those pieces into one impossible unity, which he places under the name of the father. This is the logic of disavowal. One could argue that this very same procedure is that of first generation modernism. For all the fuss about the psychic fragmentation of the subject as represented in literary modernism, those fragments are just that—a multiplicity of component parts generated in the failing effort to reproduce the modern—novelistic—subject whole and entire, all his or her selves belonging to him or herself. Anticipating Louis Althusser’s model of interpellation, Freud makes kinship itself into a type of hailing, by means of which packs are called into a unitary identity as an individual member of a family with a distinct race, gender, and class. The political consequences of doing so, as Wendy Brown explains in “Liberalism’s Family Values,” make the family the privileged site and the father the leading actor within an ideology of individualism. The ideology represented by the father is made to reproduce the normative bourgeois categories that divide the pack body into single units who,

generation after generation, subject potential packs to its prohibitions and prescribed desires.

Freud may call *un chat un chat*, but Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a pack a pack: “The Wolf-Man fascinated by several wolves watching him. What would a lone wolf be? ...[.]The wolf is not fundamentally a characteristic or a certain number of characteristics....What is a [wolf’s cry] independent of the population it appeals to or takes as its witness?” (“Becoming-Intense, Becoming Animal...” 239). Whereas to Freud, the wolves are all second-order, or partial father-figures, to Deleuze and Guattari the family is secondary to and a reduction of the pack. The family views the pack as a threat. Rather than an enclosed system fixed to a place, packs are potentially boundless and always in motion and so resist containment within any ideological matrix, especially one so pervasive as liberalism’s family values. To make their case that Freud’s initial count of seven wolves can be reduced to one, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the “result ... is always the same, since it is always a question of bringing back the unity or identity of the allegedly lost object” (“One or Several Wolves? 28). Let me again invoke Miller to justify using Freud and Deleuze to define the relationship I see between early and late modernism. As Miller explains, “late modernism finds its contextual and affective basis,” not in a fragmentation that implies a lost unity but in “a blurring of the ... boundaries between subject and object” (45). Justus Nieland’s recent book on late modernism also buttresses my claim that the aesthetics of subject-formation underwent a radical change between early and late modernism, when he claims that, “the self [was] confronted with its secondariness” in relation to the aesthetic production of this time (*Feeling Modern* 64-65).

The novelists on which my study focuses arguably pursue a cultural logic that anticipates not only Deleuze's explicit critique of Freud, but his dismissal of theories of racial, sexual, and class difference as well. Djuna Barnes was already ridding herself and her characters of one "I" when she wrote a "mock interview" where a "wise woman" claims that the only thing "I must know" is that "I ... have [always] wanted to be other than I am. ... This is insane ... surely it is insane" (qtd. in Altman, 275). My project draws on the power of late modernist novels' own theories of the human being as multiple rather than individual and in continuity with the objects and animals against which the Enlightenment defined them. Where Virginia Woolf famously argued that novelists should try to contain, "[i]n one day," "thousands of ideas" and "thousands of emotions [that] have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder" ("Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 118), William Faulkner, Djuna Barnes, and Nathanael West take up what Woolf so artfully stuffed into a single mind and disperse that material to portray humanity as a potentially boundless, heterogeneous, open, and interconnected being. Potentially connected to any being, this mass forms as the novels in question negate the difference between one form of being and another. There is no other.

This novelistic negation of difference as the principle of individuation in modern contractual societies eventually inspired a whole new generation of critical theory. The descriptive terms on which both Deleuze and Barnes rely are remarkably similar, and the same is true for Foucault, Agamben, and Faulkner, as it is for Hardt and Negri and West. In view of this similarity, it strikes me as unnecessary to "apply" recent theory to the novels that comprise my study. Instead, I intend to show how exemplary novels by Faulkner, Barnes, and West anticipated and in fact created what we might call

“precursor” theories of multiplicity, well before those theories took shape in the theoretical languages we now rely on to uncover social bodies, conditions, and behaviors other than those made of and based on individuals. I show how Faulkner, Barnes, and West alter the ideological form of a society that not only creates individuals who consider themselves “free” to become virtually anyone but also induces them to observe race boundaries, desire prescribed objects, and internalize class standards. Their novels systematically overturn the differences responsible for the modern individual’s sense of autonomy, as each produces their own aesthetic version of the mass body as a result.

Outside Difference

While my project depends on the notion that the novels themselves generate a vocabulary and aesthetic experience of collectivity irreducible to the individual, I will use a number of contemporary theories of collectivity and their distinct vocabularies to focus and enrich my readings, hopefully causing them to resonate well beyond the individual text. Let me therefore try to explain why, even though the novels I read anticipate their theoretical insights, I could not very well write this dissertation without certain works by Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben, and Hardt and Negri.

Foucault’s notion of biopower allows me to dispense with race as a category of individual and group, belonging and exclusion, which, for decades, has been taken for granted by critics of Faulkner. As Foucault explains, the logic of race in liberal contract societies is inherently flawed in its assumption of “a polarity, a binary rift within society, ... a clash between [already-constituted] races” (*Society Must Be Defended* 61). There are no “races” in this model; there is only the species and the divisions introduced within

it so as to allow large-scale statist discourses to manage the life and death of the population in uneven ways. Race is simply a division introduced within what he calls “man-as-species” (242). The notion of “man-as-species” allows us to imagine human beings as a “biological continuum” (255) from which consciousness cannot be separated out as the privileged means of observing biology, including one’s own body. Such objectification of life activates the logic of disavowal. In much the same way, Agamben’s notion of “bare life” offers me a name for the abject life that we produce, when we locate the individual as and in consciousness and relegate one’s “own” natural body, the bodies of others, and the eco-biome itself as separate and apart from oneself. “Bare life” is a concept that grounds the human in biological nature and so reverses the logic of disavowal that makes it so difficult for a novelist to write as if part of the multitude.

Reducing humanity to biological life, as both Foucault and Agamben explain, is a double-edged sword: On one hand, it establishes biology as a domain that can be divided and subdivided into human and animal, races, genders, classes, clans, nations, and so forth. It easily becomes a form of power that dumps some groups into the category of the “natural” and distinguishes others as “cultural” beings, or literate individuals. If, however, we think of human beings as one species among many species, then we provide ourselves with a new basis for moving beyond those very divisions within human life. Agamben shows how this process moves both man and animal outside the terms defining and limiting our species: “[T]o let something be” by “leav[ing] something outside of being”—namely, outside the definition of humans as unique beings, is to let humans “be” animals rather than make humans into “beings” and animals into “nonbeings” (*The Open*

91). In the face of Foucault's and Agamben's theories, it is impossible to isolate consciousness as a distinct property of humanity, separate and apart from nature and animals. Being in and a part of a mass body or "man-as-species" means that the individual must be outside his "own" consciousness and even his "own" body. The cost of being outside oneself is, I believe, small in relation to the gain: It frees us to read for behaviors approximating instinct, as I do in reading the protagonist of *Light in August*. Doing so does not turn humans "back" into animals so much as show that the difference is perhaps culture's greatest fraud.

If Agamben shows that undoing the separation between human subject and animal or natural object takes us "beyond the difference between being and beings" (*The Open* 92), then Deleuze and Guattari go beyond the eradication of that difference by arguing that we should think in terms of forms of becoming. No strangers to "becoming-animal," Deleuze and Guattari use animality as one among many figures of what they call "multiplicity." Their work makes it possible for me to show that "thinking" in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* is far from the conventional expression of an individual human being. Thought itself is made up of partialities and "micromultiplicities" (*Anti-Oedipus* 280). Both *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* militate against all forms of individuation and ego. They show how the Cartesian dualism that isolates consciousness from both embodiment and from the world of objects—including other people, is a form of divisive power. Descartes did not do us a favor in making the "'I think' ... the subject of enunciation that reflects its own use ...[.] When Descartes says, 'I think therefore I am,' he is initiating the distinction between the two subjects," that is, of mind and body (*A Thousand Plateaus* 128). To overturn this dualism, they argue for the multiple

potential of becoming, which strips the individual of any capacity to think of him or herself as one being.

Deleuze and Guattari develop an anti-human ethic in response. They set that ethic in motion by means of the aesthetic, which provides them with a more fluid basis for creating languages of becoming than, say, the language of traditional philosophical stiffness—some may call it rigor. Many of their major literary examples, examples they rely on for purposes of valorizing assemblages and multiplicities, are drawn from American literature, including Faulkner. They hold up the aesthetic not as a distinct realm of critical reflection apart from embodiment, but as an ethical dimension that eludes individuated thought. In their terms, thinking ethically “requires all the resources of art...[.] It requires a whole line of writing, for it is through writing that you become ... imperceptible” (“Year Zero: Faciality” 187) as an individual and consequently enter into relations that one consciousness simply cannot understand. Where Foucault and Agamben are especially helpful in dismantling race as a category of analysis, Deleuze and Guattari make gender irrelevant.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri tackle the category that the others strategically avoid, that is, the category of class, for which they substitute the term “multitude.” Where Foucault and Agamben helped me think about Faulkner’s *Light in August*, I found Deleuze and Guattari essential to reading Barnes’s *Nightwood*. The term “multitude” and Hardt and Negri’s revision of the central Marxist concept of “labor,” do similar work for me in reading West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The notion of “multitude” brings from the background to the foreground all those forms of “affective” and “immaterial” labor (*Multitude* 110) that take us beyond the division of the species into classes when

everything, including such objects as novels and ATMs, form networked relays of affect with and among humans. Where philosophers of the subject from Descartes through Locke and Kant divided the universe between interior consciousness and the objective world outside consciousness, Marxist class consciousness translates this dualism onto a collective level in arguing that working-class consciousness has been objectified.

“Affective labor,” by contrast, moves us into another register. It considers thinking neither the subjective property of an individual nor objectified in a laboring class, but one piece of a vast informationalized network. As such, consciousness is one among several means of computing the processes that have moved outside of consciousness and into informationalized and impersonal media.

Theory’s Little Disavowals

Theorists who endeavor to think outside the culturally imposed box of individuality encounter that, in order to do so, they must use the same language that interpellates us as individuals in the first place and gives us our places in the world. These theorists invariably sustain the illusion that ideas, proposed in and explained by language, come from within their minds and constitute a model of a world external to them. This is why we recognize them as authorial identities. Even theorists who try and describe experiences beyond individualism find themselves in a situation where they must disavow the very forms of multiplicity for which they advocate, since they cannot directly present in writing that which they seek to describe.

To show how any concept of human ontology both depends on and disavows our species’ continuity with animal existence, Agamben produces his own minor disavowal.

Given the fact that implicitly or explicitly, our definitions of the human depend on the difference between human and animal, imagining a form of being that negates the difference between human and animal is, by definition, outside language. Agamben has no option but to disavow his reliance on a highly individuated and specialized language to bring that “outside” into language. Foucault does the same thing in reverse. Foucault may understand himself as a component of “population” or “man-as-species,” but to represent the object of biopower, he must position himself outside the species body and so deny the very flows and circulations of which he was obviously a part. Put differently, the only way to define a population is to step outside and be at some distance from it, even as one is by definition an integral part of it. This is to say, that any author must, to varying degrees, maintain an unbridgeable distance from the very thing he seeks to describe that denies his or her participation in it. Hardt and Negri claim that their “concept of the multitude ... attempts to break [the] numerical alternative between single and plural” (Multitude 222-23), but they necessarily make “multitude” into “an emblem for [the] desire” (227) to go beyond that difference.

I took a brief piece of a well-known manifesto of European “high” modernism—Virginia Woolf’s “Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”—to show that she makes much the same move that Freud does in order to perpetuate the fantasy that individuals, no matter how porous, conflicted, radically complex, heterogeneous, and internally divided, are conscious beings capable of incorporating all that information. Most of the theorists associated with the concept of “multiplicity” are to my mind caught in the same dilemma of trying to expand and complicate a unified category. As I see it, only Deleuze and Guattari come close to overcoming the stubborn difference between difference and

sameness within theoretical language. The opening of “Introduction: Rhziome,” declares that “each of us [is] several, [so] there [is] already quite a crowd” (3). This might be read as authorial affectation or a signature move were it not for the fact that they become, in writing, the very writing process itself. In this key respect, I consider them much the same as the novels that provide the centerpieces of the three chapters to follow. They are one and the same with the event of writing and so not themselves. Consequently, they just won’t take shape as self-contained author-subjects; they don’t disavow but make an event of the part-“objects” of their inquiries. Indeed, they rarely, if ever designate a self by using the personal pronoun “I.” Indeed, Deleuze is quite explicit that his concern is “not [with] being this or that sort of human, but of becoming inhuman ... not seeing *yourself* as some ... animal, but unraveling your body’s human organization, exploring this or that zone of bodily intensity, with everyone discovering their own particular zones, and the groups, populations, species that inhabit them” (“Letter to a Harsh Critic” 11). Although readers never tire of trying, it is impossible to read Deleuze and Guattari as if they wrote as rational individuals precisely because they observe many of the formal tropes—of boundary violation, radical hybridity, partial subjects and objects, and metonymy—of the late modernists about whom I write, modernists who strongly reacted against the ideology and aesthetic protocols of individualism.

Deleuze and Guattari arguably move well beyond Foucault and Agamben’s concern over displacing the individual in favor of the species-body by arguing instead for what they call “anomalous” singularities, which are “neither an individual nor a species ... but a phenomenon of bordering ... a multiplicity is defined not by the elements that

compose it in extension, not by the characteristics that compose it in comprehension, but by the lines and dimensions it encompasses in ‘intension’” (“Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal...” 245). Multiplicity, in this respect, is immanence: It has no need to be “compose[d]” or “comprehen[ded]” by any consciousness, only experienced as an immediacy of the textual event, an event that pushes language to its limits, if not beyond the signifier itself. The reader becomes implicated in the text rather than, simply, reading it through the eyes of a narrator. Deleuze and Guattari, I am suggesting, reconcile two incompatible languages, one designed to render immediate the mass body, population, and the circulation of life forms in and among populations and species, and the other, a language that has “hailed” them into membership in a society of individuals.

My project pays attention to precisely what culture produces by means of the logic of disavowal. In reading three novels of late modernism, I want to pressure them into revealing curious theoretical figurations of collectivity both aligned with and beyond the order of those I have sketched above. As a result, the novels prove to be highly malleable enactments of multiplicity as both an affective and a political event. All three withhold such categories of individual and group identity as race, gender, and class, and consequently move immediately into registers of experience that render irrelevant both the Cartesian dualism that has come to define human consciousness and the forms of kinship responsible for defining contractual societies.

Novel Potential

Light in August is unique among Faulkner’s novels in this respect, marked as it is by an under-inscription of kinship. In this novel Faulkner does what few critics expect of

him. That is, he makes racial difference irrelevant as the basis of individual or group identity, a feat that he accomplishes through the protagonist, Joe Christmas. Christmas's story can be read as a history of eating. Using the anthropology and history of alimentation as well as historical examples of American biopolitical policies, I show how families and social institutions use food-ways to incorporate Christmas within the modern social body. This proves impossible. His body refuses to be defined by any modern social category that provides the raw material for modern identity. He destroys the means of doing so by converting meals back into the basic stuff of sustenance and defining it by emesis. Escaping one family and entering another domestic household, Christmas similarly thwarts all attempts to make him eat "black" food and assume a relationship to a woman as the racially inflected object of her desire. In each case, Faulkner's protagonist defeats an attempt to make him an individual and thus a member of some group. He is within the group but destroys and thus incites the rules and categories of difference. In all his alimentary interactions, he compulsively excorporates the differences that would make him Christian, masculine, or black. This refusal to take on an identity that would place the protagonist of *Light in August* within a system of social relationships is what, I argue, prompts critics almost universally—and mistakenly—to assign him one. Although I read against the grain of Faulkner criticism, in this respect I read with the grain of Faulkner's novel. *Light in August* withholds Christmas's identity and by doing so, displaces racial classification with a mass body that refuses to be defined by difference.

Christmas is phobically rendered as an outsider, orphan, more creature than human, prone to sexual predation, and racially suspicious. The fact that he is so rendered, however, says more about the radical uncertainty of the status of the individuals

attempting to fix an identity for him that would place him in a group than it does about the uncertainty as to whether or not Christmas can or should belong to any such group. Put differently, the fact that individuals whose identity depends on being white depend with equal vehemence on others being black. The desperation with which they hang on to the illusion of their racial purity makes one suggest they were in peril of losing it. Put simply, whites can't be white if there's no incarnation of blackness against which to define that trait. Faulkner represents the repercussions of such phobia in terms of what happens to white individuals when the disavowed group becomes an unavoidable and yet unidentifiable presence. The manifestations of life peculiar to Christmas—chief among them his ability to be within but belong to no group—place him outside any group but nevertheless inside society. As a figure of unindividuated life, we can see him pass from body into another, as he emerges again as Lena Grove's baby Joe.

In the second chapter, I turn to Djuna Barnes's perplexing novel *Nightwood*, arguing that she does to gender very much the same thing Faulkner does with race. That is to say, she systematically cancels out the gender differences on which the modern family depends. Barnes does so, I demonstrate, by undoing a more "basic" difference than that differentiating male from female and heterosexual from homosexual—the difference between subject and object. The Enlightenment historically assumes that objects are crucial to the constitution of subjects, and that subjects depend on objects in order to carry on relations with things outside themselves. Indeed, for psychoanalysis, objects act as points of identification and disavowal both outside of and within the subject. Using these terms, it is virtually impossible to talk about one category without opposing it to the other in a relation of dominance, denial, desire, or dependence. Readers

of Barnes try and explain the sexuality of the protagonist, Robin Vote, by means of the object choice of the sexually elusive author herself, thus defining the novel in terms of the difference between subjects and objects.

Nightwood dramatizes the mutually constitutive relations between subjects and objects that makes each an extension of the other, canceling out otherness itself. I first call attention to the protagonist's refusal to distinguish gender as "performance" from gender as "reality." I use D.W. Winnicott's theory of play to move beyond queer theory's implicit dependence on a homo-hetero binary and insist that the queerest thing about *Nightwood* is not what it does to sexual object choice, but what it does to the "potential space" between subjects and objects. By refusing to separate thought from wish fulfillment, or actualization in embodied form, the protagonist transforms subject-based consciousness that distinguishes itself from objects into a form of magical thinking. Where my reading of Faulkner shows how the mass body is connected to all life through the history of eating, my reading of Barnes demonstrates that thinking is nothing other than participation in larger-than-individual processes of thought that extend not only to other people but to objects and animals as well. This novel, as I read it, imagines a collective life-form in which we are not separate and distinct from the objects that speak to and think for us. In *Nightwood*, human relations that usually allow us to distinguish and measure characters form instead a continuous tissue of communication that thwarts all attempts to restrict the protagonist to gender, family, and domesticity. This novel's playspaces thus operate as testing grounds for relationships prior to or outside the social world that is conventionally given and reproduced by conventional fiction.

My third chapter situates *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* in the context of the debates over social class and American mass culture of the 1930s, as well as in the larger historical context of social class in relation to the public sphere and print media. To alter the ideological form of a society so made, West supplants social classes with a mass readership formed by the media. I read *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s advice column as a historical critique of the notion that there ever was an authentic and affective human individual behind the epistolary form—indeed, behind any modern form of “narration.” Contrary to the polite letters, journals, and conversation that formed the bourgeois public sphere of earlier centuries, *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s advice column testifies to the formal and historical connection—in the increasingly mass-mediated world of the American 1930s—of population, circulation, and mediation. Rather than being “social” in the traditional sense of the exchanges, relations, and agglomerations that make individuals into communities, the Westian social body is made up of two-dimensional media. I attempt to show that in West's fiction mass mediation does not destroy a class that we presume to be already “there,” but transforms how we understand collective humanity.

By detaching the sensible body of the epistle from the mass-mediated sensations circulating through the population, West imagines a social body made of body images rather than individuals. Such images are collective even though they are not exactly social. Rather than emanate from or address themselves to a group of individuals, they form a mass body that is defined by the impossibility of social description. That is, West undoes the notion that we can ever understand the body images flowing through the media-consuming population in terms of a historical narrative where the individual struggles against or within his social class. Moreover, West's indifference to social class

as the means of organizing the body of the population reveals something else about the historical turning point of the 1930s. In place of an ideal bourgeois public of reading, writing, and publicizing individuals, West sees humanity as a mass body made up of the flows and sensations that one might think of when describing media itself, beyond the pleasures of individual or class-based consumption.

The novels I have selected from the 1930s formulate in aesthetic terms a mass body opposed to the one made of sovereign individuals and the groups they form. Why should Faulkner, Barnes, and West have been imagining a mass body that neither depends on nor recognizes differences between individuals and groups and indeed refuses the uniqueness of the human species as the very foundation of society? After all, Wendy Brown has shown that the members of late modern liberal contract societies such as the U.S. stake their claims to life and indeed survival on difference. Faulkner, Barnes, and West evidently saw how categories such as race, gender and class served only to split the species from within and render it susceptible to social control. They reciprocated by turning the mass body back on itself. To do so, they created protagonists and characters whose ways of eating, thinking, and circulating made them capable of both resisting and even negating categories that differentiate the species-body into individual and group identities. Rather than writing yet another novel of the growth and development of a sovereign individual struggling against social obstacles, each of these novelists imagined her or his own version of a mass body that spells the end to race, gender, and class as the major categories that define the individual, family, and life itself. Their novels consequently operate as historical forms designed to engage in what Lyotard calls a

“severe reexamination ... [of] the thought of the Enlightenment” (*The Postmodern Condition* 73).

CHAPTER 1

Nobody As Protagonist: Faulkner Without Race

Readers of Faulkner have long agreed that the human community, as defined by kinship relations, is a central preoccupation of Faulkner's novels. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, incest is preferable to miscegenation or promiscuity. Kinship is thus too full a presence. But critics clearly have far greater difficulty reading *Light in August* in this manner because in it, kinship is conspicuously absent.¹ That absence structures the novel much as an over-inscription of kinship relations organizes the rest of Faulkner's fiction: There is no Compson family legacy in the version of the town of Jefferson particular to *Light in August*.² To understand a narrative that belongs nowhere and to nobody, critics and scholars have collapsed the novel itself into its

¹ Though there was a flurry of critical reviews the year the novel was published (1932, see Inge), the best early critic, Phyllis Hirshleifer, wrote in *The Spectator* in 1949 that "*Light in August* differs rather strikingly from such novels as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* in which a central family relationship provides a convenient and effective dramatic focus. This sort of family framework is not merely absent in *Light in August*; a positive effort has been made to remove or obscure all suggestion of family ties" (1).

² I realize that by simply looking at Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha County, one could assume that there is, to use Benn Michaels's term, a "nativist" presence in Jefferson, even though it remains unnamed in this novel. However, even if there were such "native" families—as there are in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*—families with century-long legacies of descent, they are still settler colonists and diasporic subjects without ultimate origins. This lack induces Sutpen to found such a legacy in *Absalom, Absalom!*, first with an empire in Haiti that fell apart with the 1804 revolution and then in Faulkner's county.

protagonist: a racially undecipherable orphan child whom no one knows quite what to do with. That is where the problem of kinship begins.

Intent on taking the lack of explicit kinship relations as a meaningful form in its own right, Alfred Kazin argues in “The Stillness of Light in August” (1957) that the novel is the product of a culture whose members are all “strangers to each other” (522).³ Even their sharing the same piece of terra firma is not enough to convince him that *Light in August* makes a group out of those who seem to fit into none. For Kazin, there is no group because the novel’s central concern lies with the individual alienated by “modern loneliness” (520). Not surprisingly, then, his solution to the problem of the dilemma embodied in the protagonist of *Light in August* is to claim that he struggles as a “‘stranger’ ... to become [a] man” (538). To arrive at this ambiguous conclusion, Kazin makes a compelling case that *Light in August* shows how Americans have no histories in common at all because of literary and cultural differences that make each region, its people, and their idiom “the strangest to the others” (522). Cleanth Brooks, in “The Community and the Pariah” (1963), does assume that some kind of community informs the novel only to conclude that the community is constituted by exclusions.⁴ While he cannot yet qualify those exclusions as racially motivated, he does understand the group as an absent or negative force in that all the major characters in the novel exist outside its

³ The full quotation reads: “Americans are in fact just the opposite of the homogenous mass we are always trying to be ... what distinguishes American writing is exactly the fact that we are strangers to each other and that each writer describes his own world to strangers living in the same land with himself” (522).

⁴ For a critique of Brooks’ conservatism, see André Bleikasten; Thadious M. Davis; and John Duvall. What Duvall, in “Murder and the Communities,” calls “the dominant and conservative paradigm in Faulkner studies—the cohesive community, with the family as its minimal unit” (104 fn2) depends, in Brooks’ essay, on figures of what kin cannot or must not be.

norms.⁵ Patricia McKee's *Producing American Races* (1999) supplements Brooks's argument when it contends that this group of excluded humans is made up of women and African Americans whose absence produces a coherent white male community. McKee demonstrates that in *Light in August*, "[n]ot one of the central characters ... is a native of Jefferson, Mississippi, where the novel takes place," and so the novel's community of white men depends entirely on a group of negative others to make the town their own (123).⁶ A community suppressed and denied is, in her estimation, no community at all, but figures into the life of the town as a "darkness, formlessness, corruption, rot, swamp, slime, and other images of an undifferentiated mass" (131). From this sampling of critical opinion, one must conclude that the novel encourages readers to puzzle over the terms of membership and the formation of kin groups, much as characters within the novel ponder the mystery of the protagonist's origins. The same lack of kinship that motivates reading within the novel motivates reading of the novel.

How does kinship vanish? This is not a novel, after all, of a completely isolated, self-generative, and internal individual, one whose thought becomes a subject unto itself, as in the cases of Darl or the dead mother in *As I Lay Dying*.⁷ *Light in August* begins with what might strike us as the very embodiment of kinship, a pregnant mother, and the

⁵ Brooks claims that "[t]he community ... is the powerful though invisible force that quietly exerts itself in so much of Faulkner's work. It is the circumambient atmosphere, the essential ether of Faulkner's fiction (52). Additionally, "[t]he community is at once the field for man's action and the norm by which his action is judged and regulated" (69), and it makes this novel one of "outcasts ... pariahs, defiant exiles, withdrawn quietists ... strangers ... [and] orphans" (53, 55). The work in which this essay first appeared—*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*—was published the same year that Irving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* further popularized just such sociological and psychiatric concepts.

⁶ McKee uses Lacan's model of symptomatic or negative identification, and extends it to community formation. The kin identity of white men in the novel, to the extent that it is one, depends on an image of what it is not. Rey Chow makes a similar argument that "the native" is "the white man's symptom" (*Writing Diaspora* 30).

⁷ See *As I Lay Dying* (80-81).

unclear parenthood of Lena Grove herself—her parents are dead and unidentified—and of her child and the protagonist as well, begs the question: Does the fact that the novel makes us feel its lack of kinship not imply that such excluded relations of gender and generation were once there and might reappear—as the resolution of the mystery of the protagonist’s identity if not the restoration of a community?⁸ To answer this question in the affirmative is to fall into the trap of reading the novel as an allegory of race, gender, and the communities formed by the elaboration of such categories. *Light in August* refuses to take for granted a definition of the human within which such differences can be made. In so doing, I argue, the novel radically questions the human itself.

Eric Sundquist, in his groundbreaking work *Faulkner: The House Divided* (1983), takes on the challenge of reading *Light in August* as a novel of kinship. Falling in step with the tradition of his predecessors, he admits that in contrast to Faulkner’s other major works, in *Light in August* “kinship is continually denied” (72). Contrary to such new critical forebears as Cleanth Brooks, he turns principally to “history” as manifest in tropes of “blood” and to narrative “form” in order to tease out a pattern of kinship even where such a pattern is obviously lacking (76). He reconstructs “a context for Faulkner’s fiction out of historical experience,” an experience that to him is grounded in American racial conflict (x). The fact of this conflict makes it possible to organize kin relations in a novel that otherwise confounds race. Indeed, the very denial of those relations “constitutes” what he calls—echoing Leslie Fiedler—“America’s central gothic experience” (44). Thus he implicitly and ironically suggests that all meaningful forms of

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community* that “[u]ntil this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community—one to be regained or reconstituted” (9). Such a lost history or community informs works as diverse as Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

kinship, including racial forms of kinship, are missing, repressed and replaced by figures of “passing” and “the uncanny” that Sundquist defines as such in one or more of several oppositions: “concealment and revelation” (71), the “visible” and “invisible” (73), the “veiled and intangible” (76), the “hidden and suppressed” (78). Despite the reasonableness of his new historicism, he all but admits that the novel yields up as many gothic specters as it does tangible groups.

The extravagant ingenuity of Benn Michaels’s attempt at making blood tropes into the onomatopoeic logic of Faulkner’s novels similarly fails to account for *Light in August*, a novel largely absent from his body of critical work on American modernism.⁹ To establish the differences that allow kinship to form, he declares that the blood that fails to evince Joe Christmas’s belonging to any group is in fact an “invisible essence of blackness that ... Christmas’s white bod[y] conceal[s]” (150).¹⁰ What he calls a “metaphysical essence” allows Benn Michaels simply, and contradictorily, to designate as visible something that cannot be seen and thus to insist on “a Faulkner who is not skeptical of racial identity” (151).¹¹ But if--as I believe is the case--the novel turns race into that which not only refuses outward and visible identification, but also baffles any ontological basis for “racial identity,” then Christmas cannot belong to any particular community. Thus critics who turn to race as the answer to group identity in the novel paradoxically base their reasoning on the novel’s indeterminate indicators to do so.

⁹ See *Our America* (2). By onomatopoeic, he suggests a logic by which the word is made into the thing itself by means of tropes of incest and blood.

¹⁰ Source: “*Absalom, Absalom!*: The Difference Between White Men and White Men.”

¹¹ I agree with Benn Michaels only insofar as he is making an anti-identitarian argument in that any racial basis of kinship is to him essentialist. The idea of race kinship as “metaphysical essence” is precisely the problem of an American culture and “a Faulkner who is not skeptical of racial identity” (151).

To my mind, they have fallen into Faulkner's trap. After all, Sundquist, Benn Michaels, and McKee end up arguing in spite of themselves that readers, much like mediums, can perceive the impalpable connection between a community made of individual identities and one made of something else. These critics snap up the bait offered by the defunct racial codes in the novel when they make racial allegories out of the familial connections concealed behind Christmas's secret origins, hidden beneath his skin, or operating at some level of his psyche.¹² Why, might we ask, is it self-defeating to create such allegories? Because Christmas is the means by which kin identity is simultaneously withheld and mystified. By pressing this particular protagonist into some group, one exercises much the same kind of power that Percy Grimm does in cutting Christmas open with a knife. At the very least, these critics identify with D.A. Gavin Stevens's blood theory.¹³ Rather than strive for what the novel withholds, I am interested in what the novel can tell us were we to abandon the compulsive search for kinship. What does it say about the reader's need to know race and the impossibility of doing so? Is it possible, or even desirable, to imagine human relations without some form of kinship? Before I can lay out such a field of possibilities for reading, let me first suggest some of the ways in which a community operates when it is based on kinship.

¹² Elizabeth Abel does exactly this in her analysis of Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif." She attempts, to figure out once and for all which of the two main characters is black and which white, in spite of the fact that "Recitatif" not only refuses to give away their racial identities, but also that in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison says she purposefully set this trap.

¹³ See *Light in August* (448-49).

The Anthropological Machine

Anthropology traditionally provides the terms for the differences that constitute human communities, and these are the very terms that *Light in August* consistently rejects. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben mounts an argument against what he calls “the anthropological machine” that I find particularly helpful in understanding this novel’s resistance to forms of human difference. Agamben accuses anthropology of reinforcing a nature-culture binary as the one thing all human communities have in common, thus the basis for drawing comparisons among them. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*—to take one influential example—Claude Lévi-Strauss “allow[s] the natural to be isolated from the cultural” so that we can understand “the conflicting features of [these] two mutually exclusive orders” (8). To his way of thinking, it is only “natural” for “the great apes” to engage in incestuous activity, where incest among human beings is subject to a taboo or cultural “rule” (8). The ape therefore serves both as a link between nature and culture and as a way of denying any “illusory continuity between the two orders” (8). What is a natural instinct for the ape is therefore a cultural imperative for the human and consequently what makes us human rather than animal. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, “culture can and must, under pain of not existing, firmly declare ‘Me first’, and tell nature, ‘You go no further’” (31). By this circular process, he calls on the animal to define the human.

Agamben targets this strategy on the grounds that it denies the instinctual and natural basis of the human so as to disavow our fundamental connection to and dependence on biological life. The modern tendency to understand the instinctive, species-wide aspects of culture as nature is responsible for dehumanizing the biological

component of human existence in two related ways. The first form of dehumanization introduces divisions within the species-body. Agamben sees the nature-culture binary as the basis on which we have considered such living beings as “the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner” less than human (*The Open* 37). Acting as a form of power, “the anthropological machine” distinguishes acceptably human bodies from such alien bodies as the sexual deviant, the primitive, or “the Jew” (37). By introducing the difference between nature and culture into biological life itself, the machine not only induces some living bodies to remain outside and excluded from culture; it also takes other bodies and sets them outside the human community on grounds that they muddy the boundary between human and animal. The nature-culture binary also dehumanizes life by introducing this same division within the individual body itself. Agamben describes what he calls “the physiology of the blessed” as the modern tendency of man to dwell inside consciousness, or spirit, and, from that viewpoint, regard things, including his own flesh, as if they were outside and posed a threat to the purity of that consciousness (19). No less so than the devout Christian, the modern individual comes into being through separation from and disavowal of the body and its functions as so much natural matter. Repeated disavowals turn nature into a dumping ground that props up consciousness as autonomous and unique. By disavowing certain aspects of himself, the modern individual can use that remainder to define the animal.

To get around this tautology, Agamben proposes a category in between animal and man that reveals the human qualities we relegate to the animal as the most basic—“nutritive”—means on which all other forms of life successively depend and from which man separates higher orders of life (14). Agamben proposes what he calls “bare life” as

a category that returns to the animal all the complexity and radical alterity of its existence, as it reduces humanity to little more than biological life (38).¹⁴ The kind of experience that brings us closest to understanding this state of being is “the experience of boredom” (63). In what Agamben, drawing on Heidegger, calls “the first essential moment of boredom,” the world withholds the phenomenal cues that we need to establish a relationship between ourselves, as self-enclosed individuals, to the world outside ourselves: we “are totally delivered over to something that obstinately refuses itself” (65). By depriving us of conscious engagement with things in the world around us, boredom momentarily destroys the very relationships—bridging, thus presupposing, difference between individual consciousness and world—that makes us human in the modern sense. Without that difference, we are, in a sense, open to our environment and, in this one crucial respect, in a position to understand animal existence.¹⁵ A “second structural moment of profound boredom” comes close on the heels of awareness that our consciousness is, by definition, closed off from the world (68). Here, in the “passage ... from animal environment to human world,” we are suddenly filled with a sense of the multiple possibilities for relation to the world that are withheld from us, thus our condition of being closed to the openness of the animal (68). On grasping that we are at once closed off to biological nature and yet utterly dependent on it, we catch a glimpse of the un-human component of humanity, or what Agamben calls “bare life.” As I

¹⁴ I am well aware that Agamben reveals the fascist potential of this very reduction of life to its most basic functions. See *Homo Sacer* (114).

¹⁵ The concept of “the open” (57) refers to how the animal exists “in functional unity with the environment” on which it depends (40). So radical is this dependence that the animal “is this relationship” of its senses to that which stimulates them in its environment (47). A “spider,” Agamben shows, is a spider because its web is proportioned exactly to the fly that it captures and consumes (42). “[T]he tick” is a tick because it receives and acts in response to the three stimuli that direct it to warm-blooded mammals (46). In this way, the open is a purely rhizomatic relationship.

understand the concept, “bare life” is the essential continuity between human beings and other living creatures and the eco-biome itself.

Agamben uses this term to represent human existence before culture divides it into such categories as culture and nature and begins to classify humanity on the basis of its proximity to and distance from the latter. He also insists that life itself tenaciously resists such divisions. In determining which divisions within the category of the human are operative in a given text, we tend to suppress the division that we necessarily straddle as both conscious individuals and members of a species and participants in the eco-biome. To place ourselves as conscious individuals on the culture side of the divide, relegating all other species to nature, is simply wrong-headed in that human beings are, at one and the same time, both. We are not only constituted as subjects by differentiating ourselves from the world of objects, which includes our own bodies, but also inhabited by biological life, which extends well beyond ourselves, well beyond the human species. To embrace this contradiction is to accept what Agamben calls “an existing, real thing that has gone beyond the difference between being and beings” (92).

The protagonist of *Light in August* is inescapably self-enclosed, thus compelled to carry on relationships with things. On this basis, Joe Christmas is clearly not an animal. At the same time, he cannot inhabit the categories of human difference that would allow him to exist within a human community. No stranger to the categories human and animal, in this novel Faulkner attempts to stop their mutual production in much the same way that Agamben tries to stop the anthropological machine, namely, by creating a protagonist who is “in between.” In Joe Christmas, as well as the shadow maternal figure of Lena Grove, *Light in August* makes us think of humanity in terms that disallow the

very divisions—race, class, gender, families, religion, and so forth—that organize kinship and community. Reading *Light in August* in terms of the continuity of life across cultural divisions changes how we think of kinship in the novel. I demonstrate that in Joe Christmas we have the model not of an individual so much as representative humanity designed to test the limits of the life of the body. To do so, I contend, the novel performs experiments in ingestion, abjection, reflex, instinct, and action, which refuse to set those aspects of bare life in a relation of opposition and difference from supposedly “higher” or “human” levels of consciousness and collective organization which begin and end with kinship. Rather than assume that the characters represent positions within an already-constituted human world, I argue that *Light in August* challenges the cultural ground on which that world is constituted: the biological life of the species.

Share a Story, Name, or Meal

Kinship is one of the chief bones of contention in anthropology.¹⁶ When Radcliffe-Brown claims that “the nomenclature of kinship is an intrinsic part of a kinship system just as it is also, of course, an intrinsic part of a language” (qtd. in Harris, 16-17), he has, I believe, something like the following in mind: Kinship is not only a key part of a larger cultural system, but also is the language of that system itself. It would make no more sense to separate kinship from the categories that constitute it than it would to separate the practices of a group from the language rules that govern those practices. Kinship is a kind of writing in and of itself. Like language, then, kinship acts as a

¹⁶ See C.C. Harris—who shows that the quarreling schools of kinship take three forms: descent, alliance, and exchange—for a general outline of this debate.

differential system. Kinship gives us our identities as subjects and objects. Thus it is the means and medium by which we navigate the world as both narrators and protagonists; we both tell stories and participate in them; we are both “etic” and “emic.”¹⁷ What we might call the “character of kinship” in the novel works in the same way.¹⁸ Kinship both relates the rules of the story and acts them out in writing.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Émile Durkheim implies such an equation between kinship and language when he argues that “kinship does not [necessarily] arise from the fact that [a clan] ha[s] well-defined relations of common blood; they are kin solely because they bear the same name. They are not fathers, mothers, sons or daughters, uncles or nephews” (100). Here, the character of kinship works by means of collective designation: Anyone can come together under the same rubric, title or name. A common designation can make a group into kin by creating reciprocal obligations for all members, such as helping each other, marrying according to carefully prescribed rules of endogamy and exogamy, or observing specific ways of taking revenge on another group. The name can be any combination of proper nouns that designate the group itself, an adjective that describes what they do, or a verb that does that action.¹⁹ The clearest example in *Light in August* of all three of these properties of the name is the family called “Burden.” To put it in novelistic terms, kinship is

¹⁷ “Etic” and “emic” correspond respectively to “observer” and “participant” or “native member.” These terms were coined by American linguist and anthropologist Kenneth Pike, and were used in cultural anthropology by Martin Harris. See their debate over the use of the terms in *Emics and etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*.

¹⁸ C.C. Harris uses this phrase, but he means it in terms of the qualities constitutive of kinship, whereas I use it to indicate the qualities that act as kinship, as if anthropology were a story, and kinship its main character.

¹⁹ For a similar point on clan names designating the action or materials of the world of the group, see Levi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (173-74).

established when the narrator designates a name-in-common and by the protagonists who, so designated, carry out ethical obligations to their members. Names that both designate and obligate in this way allow a group to share a history and a practice without blood ties of any kind. The character “Grimm” seems to have no direct family but his function is to kill, as suggested by his appellation. The narrative of the group is the story of its name; the name of the group and what it does are one and the same.

Practice and story, group life and material substance, are brought together in the sharing of a meal. Taking a meal together, according to Durkheim, creates an intense bond of kinship among those who are not related. It does so by literally making of those who share the meal “the same flesh and the same blood”--the group composed by eating together is composed of what they eat together (341). Food is what constitutes the group as it ensures the sameness of its various members. When it is taken as a meal, food performs an “alimentary communion,” making group composition and bodily composition identical (341).²⁰ To partake of the same body is thus to share the same history. This shared history creates a multiplicitous human entity connected by one alimentary canal which nourishes the bodies of all its part(icipant)s. In view of Radcliffe-Brown and Durkheim, we cannot assume that blood, family, and connubial relations are the only bases for kinship. Rather, these categories serve as just so many languages of kinship that work like stories, names or food to make a common body out of various members. It would seem to follow, then, that a novel without kinship would be

²⁰ Bourdieu definitively has critiqued as ideological rather than spiritual the taking of the meal. This is why, quite simply, he can say that the working and bourgeois classes are instantly identifiable as distinct groups based upon what they eat and how they take their meals. See *Distinction* (194-96).

one whose naming system and narrative grammar cannot be determined and therefore shared by a community that includes both characters and readers.

In so far as he is a figure that radically obscures racial and familial connections, be they connections of name, common consumption, or shared histories, Joe Christmas is the novel's way of imagining a modern assemblage of individuals that lacks all the traditional criteria of a community.²¹ In Christmas, Faulkner has assembled properties and capabilities that are the very conditions of another kind of corporate body, one composed, paradoxically, of anonymities who share no common descent, have never entered into an alliance, do not engage in the exchange of women, and can't be said to reproduce by normative means. This body historically pre-exists and takes exception to the rules on which readers depend whenever they imagine an individual as a member of some group.²² To the degree that Christmas represents this other corporate body, he both enables and thwarts this way of reading modern fiction.²³

²¹ On the notion of the imagined community, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (6, 44, 205). Anderson's claim that the modern nation is "conceived in language, not in blood," allows him to supplant consanguinity with language as the ground on which communities are built (145).

²² In *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries*, Warren Montag uses Spinoza's notion of an ancient and early modern body to show that the human aggregate is not made of conscious, rights-bearing, group-forming individuals, but of a corporate body that "requires air, water, and nourishment, that is, the intake of a great many foreign bodies to maintain itself and without which it would quickly perish. Further, [these basic requirements] are most often obtained only through co-operation with other people, usually a great many other people. The human body thus needs other human bodies for its very survival and thus is not only composed of a great many parts but must as a condition of its survival constantly interact with other bodies, composing a part among other parts of other, greater bodies, greater unities, greater assemblages, including human society which itself forms a part of nature" (33). Thus the life of the body—its nature and its needs—induces bodies to assemble into a corporate, or species-body that includes elements from other species and the eco-biome. Montag shows that Spinoza's radical contribution to the notion of human aggregation is that "[s]ociety is not the effect of an act of will on the part of originally autonomous individuals; on the contrary, men are naturally determined to live in society the existence of which is necessary to their survival. Human society is not separate and opposed to nature; it is part of it" (68). Rather than thinking of society in Enlightenment terms—as made up of human units whose "founding moment" or "constitutional origin" is "marked by a transfer of right" from sovereign monarch to sovereign individual--the corporate body Faulkner imagines is antithetical to the entire tradition of individual right

Like my use of the notion of “bare life,” my use of the principle of the exception is borrowed from the work of Giorgio Agamben. I can explain the importance “bare life” in *Light in August* by showing how the logic of the exception of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* unfolds when embodied in a fictional protagonist and put in play as the novel’s narrative engine.²⁴ It is only stating the obvious to say that Joe Christmas does not embody some emergent group, be it race, class, or gender, within the category of the human; the novel is overdetermined in this respect. One of Christmas’s few early memories is of the moment when he was renamed by “the stranger” McEachern (145). That moment inscribes the protagonist within the three different rules of kinship that can make a group without consanguinity: “‘From now on his name will be McEachern.’ ... ‘He will eat my bread and he will observe my religion,’ the stranger said. ‘Why should he not bear my name?’” (145). The name change, as if by decree, is intended by McEachern to move Christmas from “a heathenish name” (145) to the sacred name of McEachern’s own Christian family. The McEacherns may not have shared a history with Christmas before they adopted him, but eating food together means sharing religion because there is, in Mary Douglas’s terms, an “analogy between altar and table” (75).²⁵ For an old-fashioned Christian patriarch such as Mr. McEachern, breaking bread at the table in his home

and group formation (68). In Christmas, Faulkner repeats an older corporate body that, in being within nature, is based on the life of the species.

²³ As Montag observes in *Bodies, Masses, Power*, “Spinoza’s work from beginning to end remains haunted by figures of the unassimilable, the exceptions to the democracy without exceptions, and simultaneously by the impossibility of their exclusion” (86). Put differently, the laws of kinship, society, and state must engage in “[t]he disavowal of bodies and masses,” anonymous bodies that comprise the very form of the species and to which Christmas is connected. This disavowal continues in “our own time, [which,] no less than Spinoza’s, is haunted by its own fear of the masses,” or anonymous bodies defined by collective, corporeal impulses rather than individual, conscious, and rational decisions (120).

²⁴ While I do not use the exception to talk about state power, as Agamben does, the principle of the exception places Christmas as an outsider within the group and thus allows him to refuse to take on group traits. This principle explodes the group and creates another kind of body.

²⁵ Source: “Deciphering a Meal.”

amounts to a form of eucharist, or partaking of a sacred body. As in any such act of communion, this retroactive imposition of a shared past becomes the only possible future for the child, a future anterior history that is fed to his soul just as food is fed to his body.²⁶

Christmas's defiant response is to tell himself "*My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas*" (145). His name is therefore an anti-name that prevents him from being taken into the self-contained household and excludes him from the normative reproductive processes regulated by kinship. Christmas will not become Christian because he would lose his name, a name assigned to him simply because he was "'left on the doorstep [at the orphanage] on Christmas eve'" (142). The origins of his given name are equally obscure.²⁷ He neither prays nor learns the catechism with his father and would rather faint from hunger or eat alone in a corner than share a meal with the McEachern family. Mr. McEachern may have adopted Christmas, but the reverse is not true: McEachern always remains a "stranger" to his adoptee. While Christmas lives with the McEacherns, he is within that family and yet impervious to its rules. Those rules presuppose within the order of law, something outside the law—an outlaw to which the law does not apply and so must be applied. As Agamben formulates this paradox, "[t]he rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it" (*Homo Sacer* 18). By defying, refuting, and attacking if not killing his adoptive father, and nearly

²⁶ In *Bodies, Masses, Power*, Montag (again drawing on Spinoza) demonstrates that "religion must be understood through the disposition of the bodies that it organizes and the degree to which this disposition produces the mental decision to obey priest and king. The secret of despotism is not its ability to persuade minds but its ability to move bodies, to extract from them their force and power, or to turn that power to its own benefit, all the while producing the retroactive effect of a consent that conceives of itself as the origin of the acts of the body" (49). There is no difference between (feeding the) body and (bribing the) soul.

²⁷ Mrs. Hines calls him "'Joey'" (380), which is somewhere between a proper name, the name for a baby marsupial, and a pet name for "Joseph."

starving himself as well, Christmas not only makes himself the exception to the laws of kinship but also makes it necessary to create those laws. We might say, using Agamben's terms, that because the novel "includes" Christmas as that which "is outside itself"—outside the rules of kinship that we have identified with writing—he becomes "the figure in which singularity is represented as such, which is to say, insofar as it is unrepresentable" (24).

Out of Nowhere

Readers and critics of this novel are no different from characters within *Light in August* in this one respect: Throughout the novel, various characters attempt—and the novel invites readers—to fix Christmas in terms of race. For Louis Althusser, belonging to a group and being recognized as an individual member within that group requires such acts of "hailing." His account of human existence eliminates the possibility of not being interpellated, as that's what cultures do. Stephen Heath rightly argues that Althusser leaves us no way out of "total subjection" (34). Even before birth a category awaits the human subject, designating race as well as class and gender and determining the limits on his social and psychological futures accordingly. According to Althusser, the name, its origin, and its function paradoxically individuate the subject by assigning it place in a particular ideological-material order. With this principle in mind, let us consider who "Christmas" is and to what order he belongs.

To understand how the protagonist came to be called Christmas—and, indeed, to call himself by that name—the reader feels compelled to trace him back, to the extent the novel allows, to his origins. Such origins, proposes Althusser, are circumscribed by "the

family ideology ... in which the unborn child is expected: it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject ... once it has been conceived" (176). By the word "conceived," Althusser asserts the translatability of the biological conception of the child into its ideological conception guised as pure ideality.²⁸ In neither sense of conception, however, does Christmas support such a theory of individual identity. Like his namesake, Faulkner's character has no identifiable father (and is no doubt illegitimate in terms of the law of the community). While he obviously cannot assume an unnamed father's name, neither can he assume his mother's father's name (Hines). Conceived exogamously and outside the exchange of women, Christmas lacks precisely what it takes to assign him an individual identity. Indeed, the closer the narrative approaches the origins of its protagonist, the more impossible it becomes to ascertain them, as they are located in a domain of disguise, misrule, and carnivalesque inversion: "One night a circus passed the mill", and at some unclear point Doc Hines's daughter, Milly, runs off with someone from the circus (373). The ensuing unreliability, if not mendacity, of the testimony provided by members of the circus—coupled with the insanity of Doc Hines—conceives the child in precisely those terms connoted by "circus." Thus the novel quite deliberately offers us a protagonist whose "conception" eludes interpellation.

Doc Hines does consider the child racially mixed. But we cannot attribute his violent reaction to this conception to the knowledge that his daughter was impregnated by

²⁸ Althusser argues that the unity of the material-biological and the ideal-fantastical arises from the physical or embodied, ritual practice of ideology. See "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (166-70).

a “black” or “Mexican” (374). But we can attribute his reaction to the lack of knowledge as to who the other man was, which robs Hines of control of his daughter’s body, of a position within patriarchy, and of the perpetuity of his family. Thus his indeterminate origins make Hines’s grandson necessarily a pollutant. In anthropological terms, Hines’s lack of knowledge cancels out the conditions necessary for kinship—in the words of Jean-François Lyotard, this lack obviates “[t]he consensus that permits such knowledge to be circumscribed and makes it possible to distinguish one who knows from one who doesn’t (the foreigner, the child) [and] is what constitutes the culture of a people” (*Postmodern Condition* 19). By introducing this child into the ideological narrative of the Hines family, we might say, Faulkner deliberately disturbs both the distinctions and the common ground constitutive of the local culture he so carefully constructs in his other novels, as well as in the framework of the Hines family, a local culture that depends on the material rituals, practices, and even fantasies of that family. No wonder his grandchild’s elusive identity generates paranoid delusions in Doc Hines.

Or at least so we must infer from Byron Bunch’s speculation that “[m]aybe the circus folks told him. I don’t know. He ain’t never said how he found out, like that never made any difference” (374). What makes Christmas different recedes with his origins and disappears in the circus. No one witnessed a relationship between Hines’s daughter and a circus fellow, and even the speculations we do receive are filtered through Bunch who heard it from Hines’s wife decades after the events took place, and who “says [her circus informant] could not have known anymore than she did, where the gal [Hines’s daughter] was then” (375). Perhaps the clearest example of the problem with the apocryphal discourse of origins is the fact that Hines “got his pistol and knocked [his

wife] down across the bed when she tried to stop him and saddled his horse and rode off” to kill the first man in “the first buggy” he sees. According to the same chain of testimony, this was a man Byron Bunch says ““might have been a stranger or a neighbor for all he [Hines] could have known by sight or hearing”” (376). The point, Mrs. Hines herself explains, is that there is no evidence: no one ““never knew for certain”” who impregnated Milly (378). That the unknowable father is cast in terms of racial-hereditary suspicions is as much a function of kin reproduction as the name of the father; as one of the means by which kinship is controlled or disrupted, race is a subset of the ideological fantasies (and fears) that induce individuals to imagine themselves as unique parts of a family, community, or nation, and to exclude those who cannot be assimilated to the same.

The paradox of the ideology of the name is that, while it provides one with the belief in his or her particular identity, the name actually places the one so named within a differential system of similar names. As a non-individual, the child is purely conceptual—in Althusser’s terms, a fantasy being. In his model, this imaginary realm is in fact that which provides the subject with the delusion that although inscribed in a particular position, s/he is free to make choices about her or his life or the lives of others. The conviction that there is an “outside” to ideology works only insofar the subject is already “inside” ideology and accepts his or her position as a racialized, gendered, and classed being as his or her very own self.

Following his midnight deposit of the child on Christmas Eve at an orphanage, Hines silently oversees the child’s upbringing. He watches the nurses, dieticians, and other women of the asylum

desecrating the Lord's sacred anniversary with eggnog and whiskey...[and] open the blanket [with the child in it]. And it was her, the Jezebel of the doctor, that was the Lord's instrument, that said, 'We'll name him Christmas' and another one said 'What Christmas. Christmas what' and God said to old Doc Hines 'Tell them' and they all looked at old Doc Hines with the reek of pollution on them, hollering 'Why, it's Uncle Doc. Look what Santa Claus brought us and left on the doorstep, Uncle Doc' and old Doc Hines said 'His name is Joseph' and they quit laughing and they looked at old Doc Hines and the Jezebel said 'How do you know' and old Doc Hines said 'The Lord says so' and then they laughed again, hollering 'It is so in the Book: Christmas, the son of Joe. Joe, the son of Joe. Joe Christmas' they said 'To Joe Christmas'" (384-85)

One could argue that Hines did in fact name the protagonist. But the fact that "Joseph" is not only a "Christian name" rather than a surname, or name of the father, but also irreverently shortened into "Joe" by a new and different group of substitute pseudo-caretakers suggests he is, in fact, renamed. In the spirit of a joke, they assign to him a family name—Christmas—that does not place him within but rather outside of any family. The women mock their interpellative gesture, "This is your origin! This is your place in the world! This is what you must do!" (Althusser 177), which in turn echoes Hines's belief that God told him "'You have served the foreordained will of God'" (385). That "hollering" women rather than the patriarch do the naming sets aside the naming practices that were the exclusive property of men (and of God to self-beget a son). By ventriloquizing that authority, the women turn naming into an erasure of origins, not because it profanes the "sacred anniversary" of the birth of Christ, but because it evacuates the divine performative of its power.²⁹ By withholding knowledge of Christmas's origins, I would argue, Faulkner not only made the protagonist's race

²⁹ See *The Psychic Life of Power*, where Judith Butler discusses Althusser's use of the divine performative (110).

unknowable, he also—and more importantly—made it irrelevant. This alone is enough to make him exceptional in the disturbing way that only Agamben's "Homo Sacer" can be exceptional, thus destined to promote the construction of social categories within the novel and to be excluded from them.³⁰

Faulkner has indeed constructed Christmas to incorporate the salient differences of the population of this novel in a way that sets him within the community and yet makes him incapable of settling anywhere. The protagonist of *Light in August* transforms race from something that is on the surface of the body to be read into something that the reader inscribes on or within the body. Obsessive attempts on the parts of both characters in the novel and of critics of the novel to categorize Christmas suggests that it is impossible to do so. It is also a sure sign that both characters and community know what those categories are. While I would never suggest that this novel is unaware of the racial categories that constitute its historical context, the sheer proliferation of racial descriptors in the text betrays its formal skepticism about so placing any specific individual. By describing Christmas as "parchmentcolored" (123) Faulkner suggests that his protagonist lives in what Agamben calls the "zone of indistinction" between categories (64).³¹ Thus described as uninscribable, Christmas is capable of modifications, modifications that

³⁰ As Agamben argues in *Homo Sacer*, the figure of sacred man takes "the form of double exception ... both from the sphere of the profane and from that of the religious" (82). Rather than either the profane or religious, sacred man "is instead the originary form of the inclusion of bare life in the juridical order ... bare life insofar as it operates in an inclusive exclusion" and on the basis of which politics tries violently to categorize that life (85).

³¹ Agamben uses this phrase to describe how the exception straddles the threshold between inside and outside, nature and culture, and language and the non- or extra-linguistic. Characters in the novel claim that as a "white nigger" (344), Christmas "never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad" (350). If Christmas were both white and black, those terms would act as a kind of hendiadys where both nouns also act as modifiers. But he is neither of the individual terms nor the result of their mixture. Therefore, Christmas is inexplicable, in Irving Howe's and James Snead's terms, as a "mulatto" (129, 117). For more on the concept of the "white nigger," see Sundquist's "Faulkner, Race, and the Forms of American Fiction."

work to his advantage during his initial 15-year period of exile and then during his affair with Joanna Burden. The fact that he cannot be pinned down to a biological origin or function—whether a fantasized, named, gendered, sexual, or racial one—within any community influences how others see and strive to position him in relation to themselves. In this respect comparable to the topology of a Möbius strip, the sides of whose surface are impossible to identify as outside versus inside, the protagonist serves as a categorical catalyst.³²

Like the mass body in Foucault's model of biopower, Christmas is created so that the novel can examine the propensities and limits of the biological life of human beings. According to Rousseau—and, it is fair to say, the Enlightenment model of contractual relations in general—man is first an individual and then enters into contractual relations with a collective of individuals “in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before” (qtd. in Althusser 124). The sovereign individual human subject is the assumed and continuing constituent unit. According to Marx's formulation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, however, the reverse is true: “Man” is first “a species being ... [in that] he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things).” Only later, through “estranged labor,” is man separated from nature and the universal “*life of the species* into a means of individual life” (emphasis in original, 75, 76). Foucault's mass body, by contrast to both Rousseau and Marx, does not confer social existence either on a collectivity of individuals or on alienated members of a species. Although the “administration of bodies and the calculated management of life... [is] without question an indispensable element

³² See *Homo Sacer* (37).

in the development of capitalism,” the salient feature of the mass body is the fact that it is alive (*History of Sexuality, Vol. I* 140, 141). How can life be detached from social relations? Althusser suggests it can’t, but Faulkner was clearly interested in imagining this possibility. At the orphanage, Christmas was confined to a cage of sorts, “set in a grassless cinder-strewnpacked compound surrounded by smoking factory purlieus and enclosed by a ten foot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or zoo, where in random erratic surges, with sparrowlike childtrebling, orphans in identical and uniform blue denim [lived]” (119). Denied any individual identity, forced into the same series of “uniform blue denim,” they form a group that is neither opposed to one made of individuals, nor the same as Marx’s collective body of humans whose (animal) nature is alienated from them.³³ It is something else, something more basic than either because, I would argue, it is in between.

Being in between, according to Derrida, refers to “the diverted and equivocal *passage* from one difference to another” rather than to the opposition of terms or their negation (emphasis added, 148).³⁴ If we can trace Christmas’s movement in and out of categories, so that he is not man as opposed to animal or animal as opposed to man, then the protagonist is the very substance that holds together “the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences” on which both the novel and the culture are based (145-46). Agamben makes a similar argument with respect to the language of anthropology, which “no longer articulates nature and man in order to produce the human through the suspension and capture of the inhuman.... [I]n the reciprocal suspension of

³³ See *Capital, Vol. I* (647), and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (74-78).

³⁴ Source: “Differance.”

the two terms, something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity” (*The Open* 83).

What Christmas helps us to identify is a form of challenge to Enlightenment thinking—which makes consciousness, mind or self that which distinguishes modern man from his primitive counterpart who is consequently dumped into the category of animal. Faulkner clearly refuses the break between the embodied mind (of Enlightenment man) and the instinctual body that operates by other processes that are not specific to any individual or group of individuals. He uses Christmas to produce continuity where all kinship systems depend on a break. The novel in fact uses the term “chimaera” in order to describe the protagonist’s ability to act as a changing body that can pass from one term to another in any number of oppositions (449).³⁵ In that he does not know what he is or where he is from, we might say that Christmas embodies a disavowed aspect of American identity itself.³⁶

This capability—to be inside the group and yet define what is outside it—cuts both ways. It paradoxically allows the protagonist a certain freedom but also renders him susceptible to harm. He inhabits what Agamben calls a “zone of indistinction in which the life of the exile” becomes one of “bare life” (*Homo Sacer* 110). The crime he is

³⁵ This term is deployed by D.A. Gavin Stevens, who uses it to define Christmas in terms of black versus white blood, but I do not believe we should fall into the trap of assigning the protagonist to such a simple binary. He passes, as it were, between many more categories than those of race. See Gena McKinley and Judith B. Wittenberg.

³⁶ To take a brief example from an earlier period, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” the protagonist cannot definitively say what his history is or to what group he belongs. He must disavow his so-called kinsman and thus kinship to join an undifferentiated mass for reasons that are never revealed. Even if we accept that this disavowal is of the British ancestry of his kinsman, as Hawthorne’s preface suggests, the new “American” mass, in refusing to be British, has no positive identity of its own. See also William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (64-65).

accused of committing does not “have the character of the transgression of a rule that is then followed by the appropriate sanction” but “constitute[s] instead the originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed” (*Homo Sacer* 85). As if to acknowledge that prohibitions are made not before but after and, in a sense, for him, Christmas says to himself, ““Like there is a rule to catch me by, and to capture me that way would not be like the rule says’” (337). The police and a posse hunt down the protagonist under pretense that he is not only a murder suspect, but also one whose legal status is suspended by virtue of the fact that he exists in between the racial categories that require individuals both to observe and to embody such boundaries. If the law defines Christmas as outside its limits, then it is both null and omnipotent in relation to him—which is the very definition of vigilante law. This categorical crisis reduces the protagonist to the status of bare life.³⁷

We are, I think, tipped off to the fact that something like this logic works in and through Christmas, when the police track him by means of disciplinary techniques designed to deal strictly with his biometric parameters: The law “could even see the prints of his knees and hands where he had knelt to drink from a spring” (327). Deleuze's essay on faciality is instructive here. He explains that the “signifying traits” of faces are used to identify categories or types of person such as “[a] child, woman, mother, man, father, boss, teacher, police officer” (168). In the novel, Hightower shows that

³⁷ The same kind of thing happens in Judith Butler's version of *Antigone* and in Agamben's example, of the werewolf—which is a “continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture” who “dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither” (*Homo Sacer* 109, 105). Like the werewolf, Christmas literally moves between homes and heath.

such individuating logic—as opposed to the biometric measurements applied to man as species—fails where it comes to Christmas's face. All the faces that crowd Hightower's mind, the narrator says, “all look a little alike, [are] composite. But he can distinguish them one from another: his wife's; townspeople, members of that congregation ... Byron Bunch's; the woman with the child; and that of the man called Christmas.” Christmas's “face alone is not clear. It is confused more than any other” and composed of more parts (491). The traits of an individual subject thus become unidentifiable: ““Why its.....’ [Hightower] thinks. ‘I have seen it, recently[....] Why it's that.....boy’” (492).

But if the law defines Christmas as outside its limits, then it is both null and omnipotent in relation to him, which is the very definition of vigilante law. Christmas acquires certain attributes specific to the principle of lawlessness that shapes the law:

Time, the spaces of light and dark, had long since lost orderliness. It would be either one now, seemingly at an instant, between two movements of the eyelids, without warning. He could never know when he would pass from one to the other, when he would find that he had been asleep without remembering having lain down, or find himself walking without remembering having waked.... House or cabin, white or black, he could not remember which. (333, 334)

By serving as the outlaw around which the law forms itself defensively, Christmas loses his sense of the difference between self and world—indeed, the difference by means of which the external world organizes the internal world of the subject in terms of “light and dark,” “one” or “the other.”³⁸ For Agamben this domain of misrule is where politics and

³⁸ The cinematic language of instantaneity vis-à-vis the “movements of the eyelids” is not accidental in regard to the law, as it is used to suspend or freeze the images produced by language in the same way that the state of exception suspends or freezes the law. See e.g. Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*. Examples of the use of film for fascism are Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1936) and *Triumph of the Will* (1934). In the American case, the equivalent would be D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Faulkner's Hollywood history has been documented in Blotner.

sovereign power are exercised. Agamben repeats and modifies Foucault's idea of power over biological life—what Foucault terms “biopower”—by emphasizing the degree to which life is defined solely by its exposure to death. For Foucault, the capacity of biological life to be killed is less important to the agent called “biopower” than the fact that a creature's life is both the “object and ... objective of” biopolitics, a politics that manages and maximizes populations by normalizing and regularizing their bio-elements (*Society Must Be Defended* 254).

Biopower conceives of bare life as energy to be harnessed rather than divided up and, failing that, suppressed; the cultural compulsion to classify, divide, and ultimately purify is less important than the fact that the mass body is always, by definition, alive. As such, the mass body is not “in between” culture and nature in a way that presupposes their difference; it is what connects even the most self-conscious individual to the very nature from which he must distinguish himself in order to exist as such. Whether life is capable of being killed or instead is made to live—bare life is defined by the fact that life itself is in no way “natural” but orchestrated by the mass biological entity of man-as-species. We might say that for Agamben, “bare life” is the nature we are in, where for Foucault it is the nature we are always in as part of the biological entity “man-as-species” (*Society Must Be Defended* 242). How better for the state to express its power to make live than by allowing some of its elements to die?

You Are What You Cannot Eat

As the figure of a bare life, Christmas is the threshold at which life is defined as not dead and at which life is no longer worth making live. At this level, Christmas's

living body is another manifestation of his in between-ness in that it serves as a point of intersection where the species-body, or at least the population of the novel, is “replaced by general biological processes” (*Society Must Be Defended* 249). The biological process perhaps most basic to existence is that of taking in food. One narrative thread of the novel ties Christmas to what might be called a history of eating, which explains how food creates a body out of a people who might otherwise not be kin. Food does not serve this function with respect to Christmas’s adoptive family, but he does have to eat nevertheless. In doing so, he tests the limit between what is and is not human. Mary Douglas—in a remarkable essay called “Deciphering a Meal” (1972)—calls such a threshold “the fit between the medium’s [the meal’s] symbolic boundaries and the boundaries between categories of people” (68). After Joe has endured several beatings, near starvation, and a wall of silence, Mrs. McEachern brings him

a tray of food. She set the tray on the bed. He had not once looked at her. He had not moved. “Joe,” she said. He didn’t move. “Joe,” she said. She could see his eyes were open. She did not touch him.

“I aint hungry,” he said.

She didn’t move.... “I know what you think. It aint that. He never told me to bring it to you. It was me that thought to do it. He dont know. It aint any food he sent you.” He didn’t move. His face was calm as a graven face ... “You haven’t eaten today. Sit up and eat. It wasn’t him that told me to bring it to you. He dont know it. I waited until he was gone and then I fixed it myself.” (154)

Eating in solitude, the young Joe refuses a meal prepared by and for a McEachern on grounds that eating their food would make him McEachern. But eat he must “the dishes she would prepare for him in secret and then insist on his accepting and eating them in secret, when he did not want them” (167). Although life compels him to eat, he nevertheless resents the food Mrs. McEachern brings him, as such succor mitigates the

“punishment which, deserved or not, just or unjust, was impersonal ... [and between] man and the boy” (167). Joe prefers the violent relationship between man and boy because it was a relationship not of self and kindred but an “impersonal” relationship between sheer social power and a resistant body.

To maintain that relationship, he performs a ritual that strips the meal of any positive relational meaning by removing and breaking all the containers that separate and thus transform various nutrients into a meal. The citation above continues,

He sat up then. While she watched him he rose from the bed and took the tray and carried it to the corner and turned it upside down, dumping the dishes and food and all onto the floor. Then he returned to the bed, carrying the empty tray like it was a monstrance and he the bearer...[she] knelt in the corner, gathering the broken dishes back into the tray. Then she left the room....

He was just eight then...an hour later, he rose from the bed and went and knelt in the corner as he had not knelt on the rug [to pray], and above the outraged food kneeling, with his hands ate, like a savage, like a dog. (154-55)

Joe refuses the food-ways that would make him McEachern by turning the meal into something that keeps him from starving. The ritual he performs produces neither the raw nor the cooked, but something else.³⁹ What is exposed or demonstrated by this “monstrance” is the bare life of the body itself, its impulses, its needs, and even its nature, rather than its consecration or transformation into culture, spirit, ontology, or moiety.

In traditional anthropological terms, the overturning of the meal would seem to trace a movement from the sacred or the consecrated human body to the profanity of the

³⁹ The reference is to Levi-Straus’s *The Raw and the Cooked*. Put simply, the raw versus cooked distinction corresponds to nature versus culture, with the cook acting as the agent who transforms food from the one category to the other.

animal who merely eats because it is starving; culture is turned back into nature. Viewed from this perspective, the rituals and accouterments of alimentation that organize bodies and their nourishment produce the very norms by which some are deemed human and others less so. Inclusion or exclusion from such a norm is effected by the organization of food into categories of purity and its defilement.⁴⁰ Were this case, Christmas would be violating a taboo against eating food considered unclean. Such a reading would be mistaken. The boy's refusal—his literal overruling—of the tray of food places him in a “zone prior to the distinction between the sacred and profane, religious and juridical” (*Homo Sacer* 74).⁴¹ Just as his name vitiates both religious and kin law, so too does his refusal to eat socially—or even alone from a tray—place (sacred) human and (profane) animal impulses and categories in continuity and contiguity, destroying their oppositional and mutually defining relationship. It is not the inherent purity of the food that makes it suitably human but rather the classification of food as a meal contained in dishes on a tray that makes it fit to be eaten with kin.⁴² Christmas puts himself at odds with the McEacherns, with Faulkner's narrator, and with the reader—anyone with a claim to social identity—by rejecting the organizing principles of dishes and trays. But by doing so, he is not reduced to a state of nature as opposed to culture. That he eats *like* an animal without *being* one suggests instead that he asserts his similarity to rather than identity

⁴⁰ See Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, in particular the chapter on “The Abominations of Leviticus.” See also Hayden White's “Bodies and Their Plots.”

⁴¹ Christmas negates the analogy I referred to earlier, in which Douglas claims that “the meal and the sacrificial victim, the table and the altar are made explicitly to stand for one another” (76).

⁴² Douglas addresses the difference between inherent filthiness versus classificatory schemas producing that effect in her reply, in “Deciphering a Meal,” to critics of her earlier *Purity and Danger*. See “Deciphering a Meal” (78-79).

with a dog.⁴³ As “bare life,” he is neither animal nor human but the switch-point between them. To put it another way, by belonging neither to nature nor to culture, Christmas depends on and produces the distinction between the two.

The four things defining the human-animal difference in this instance are: table and chair⁴⁴ (as opposed to ground or floor), utensil or hand (as opposed to mouth), fitting food (not rot), and containers (rather than a pile of food).⁴⁵ This episode is designed so that human and animal interpenetrate instead of differentiate: Dogs, for example, are included in the human when induced to eat above the ground from a plate or bowl. But they are not human because they eat with their mouths and do not bother to discriminate between food and rubbish. Christmas places himself among human beings when he eats good food with his hands, but he simultaneously sets himself outside the human in that he eats from a pile on the floor. As such a figure of in-betweenness, Christmas both establishes and undoes the stability of the difference maintaining those categories; when it comes to alimentation, humans and animals are only a table’s height, a hand’s grasp, a dish’s rim, or a day’s spoil away from becoming each other. In this sense, Christmas is not the Hegelian synthesis of opposites that form a new category, but a figure more like Deleuze’s rhizome. By taking on the characteristics of each side of a seeming opposition—such as Deleuze’s example of the orchid-patterned wasp and the wasp-patterned orchid—the rhizome becomes a bit of both while remaining neither. Partially

⁴³ Where bare life and biopower are concerned, race and racism are mobilized only as a cover for other needs, such as those of the state or mass body. To Foucault, distinctions pertaining to purity and vitality produce race and mobilize racism rather than the other way around. *Race is thus a subset of biopower. Society Must Be Defended* (255-57).

⁴⁴ There aren’t tables and chairs themselves in this scene, but a tray and a bed, which function the same way.

⁴⁵ See “Deciphering a Meal” (72-77) and Levi-Strauss’s “The Culinary Triangle.”

included in each but being neither fully human nor fully animal, Christmas is excluded from both. Food's chief function for Christmas is to keep him not dead, and so his consumptive practices—like the body they create between human and animal—are a “threshold of indistinction” between the nutritive and the inesculent: He is merely alive (*Homo Sacer* 27).

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx suggests that man both is made of and is in nature: “Certainly drinking, eating ... are also genuinely human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal” (74-75). Instead of animals being inhuman, humans must eat and thus share their nature with animals: “Man lives on nature—[which] means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in intercourse if he is not to die” (76). And while Marx affirms the consciousness and spirituality of man as what makes the species a human one, he also maintains that “man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature [which] means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (76). Christmas, by contrast, is neither Marx's human animal, nor exactly entirely an animal, but is forced in the camp-like orphan's asylum to occupy a sequestered world where kinship is displaced by herd-like sameness. Being imprisoned would seem to contradict Marx's utopian vision of an un-estranged labor that would allow man to reconnect to his species-being, but Marx is right that “if he is not to die,” Christmas's life depends on what and whether he eats (76). Presumably, the food in such a place is as uniform as the orphans, and is fed to them at intervals with a regularity that turns them ever more into the same body.

The novel's description of the “steel-and-wire fence” of the outer perimeter of the

“penitentiary” takes the form of disciplining the bodies of the prisoner-orphans in terms of what they are allowed to eat (119). Thus accidents, or what Foucault calls “aleatory events that occur within a population” are eliminated in a situation where food must be taken as a “serial phenomen[on]” (246). Christmas does find something to incorporate that would alter his body’s similarity to all others like it: toothpaste, which “he discovered by accident” (120). This discovery activates the aleatory operation of the mass body, which the rest of the novel will try and fail to regulate. The inherent unpredictability of an act of consumption that in part poisons the boy suggests that bare human life cannot distinguish between food that tastes sweet from non-food that tastes sweet. The mass of life, which is partly self-regulatory and partly regulated by the state and its apparatuses (in this case, an orphan’s asylum and the medical establishment⁴⁶), is fed instead of able to feed itself and so cannot care for itself as an individual does. In contrast to McEachern food, which is biologically digestible but repulsive to the protagonist, the dentifrice Christmas nibbles “for almost a year,” while desirable, is undigestible (120). It does not act to “optimize a state of life” at the asylum (*Society Must Be Defended* 246).

The mass body consumes until nothing consumable remains; that which it cannot convert into itself is thrown out or regurgitated. Vomiting is as important as consuming in this novel.⁴⁷ Although toothpaste tastes pleasing in small quantities and proves to be not a psychological substitute for but a physical analog to and repetition of sex, it is

⁴⁶ See Goffman on the social history of American asylums and inmates.

⁴⁷ Kristeva has demonstrated the significance attached to vomiting as abjection. See *Powers of Horror* (2, 5-6), for a few of many such examples of the undoing of the inside/outside border.

nevertheless a biotoxin if taken even in moderate amounts.⁴⁸ The mode of negative self-definition entailed by abjection is reinforced by the narrator's observation that neither "animal warning" nor "human being warning" could stop him from eating the goop, until "[h]e seemed to be turned in upon himself" and any more "refused to go down" (122). After vomiting it up, Christmas says "with complete and passive surrender, 'Well, here I am'"—he is constituted by what he casts out (122). In overturning the McEachern meal, he was a starved body that ate like an animal; here he is defined by emesis. Hayden White would convince us that "[t]he care, control, disposal, and cultivation of the body's effusions provide the basis of all 'culture'" ("Bodies and Their Plots" 234). But Christmas's effusions have nothing to do with eating the wrong food because what he has eaten, in the case of the toothpaste, is simply not food. Toothpaste is a particularly interesting substance to eat and to vomit, because it is a means of purifying and polishing the boundary between what is outside and what is taken in. Before or after a day's meal, it cleans and sanctifies the entrance point of food. For Christmas, there is no such sanctification or cleansing because there is no such boundary. Rather than reinforce the gastronomic distinctions of his culture he excorporates a more basic "basis of all 'culture'"—the difference between food and non-food.

Christmas's history of eating may be related—insofar as he is an orphan in a pen—to the thousands of orphans used as test objects under the emerging and expanding regime of American biopower. In an essay aptly titled "Your Dog and Your Baby,"

⁴⁸ There was in fact a 1930's toothpaste, "[t]wo-fifths of each tube [of which] is potassium chlorate, a poison that [was] responsible for dozens of deaths.... What a toothpaste for children to use, or to be left within reach of infants! Stefan Ansbacher, writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, states that several authors consider 8 grams of potassium chlorate a sufficient quantity to cause death. There are nearly 30 grams of [it] in each 2 1/2-ounce tube of *Pebeco*" (*100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* 65).

Susan E. Lederer suggests that orphans and animals were equal opportunity organisms for the study of the effects of germs and poisons: dogs, cats, mentally ill and bastard children as young as four years of age were deliberately infected on grounds that their mental illnesses and/or lack of (responsible) parents rendered them, like animals, without human power to consent or even the capacity for pain. I do not wish to force an historical analogy between the toothpaste episode in this novel and the biological experiments that were well under way by the time it was written, but the ideological agreement between the two is instructive. In every product designed for improving life, there is what we could call a life allowance beyond which the cure becomes the poison. Arthur Kallet and F.J. Schlink documented this phenomenon in their exposé, *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics* (1933). It reads like a manifesto for the population to rise up against the “callous disregard for human life” perpetrated by both the companies who made the very products that were supposed to enhance life by killing germs and “the literary men of the advertising world ... [who] fill[ed] the subway and trolley cars with an endless row of ivory smiles” (98, 64). This work of sensational, even gothic nonfiction went through twenty printings between its initial publication on January 12th, 1933, and January 15th, 1934.⁴⁹ The book continued in popularity and “became one of the best-selling books of the decade.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Source: The 1976 Reprint Edition by Arno Press Inc.

⁵⁰ Source: American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, City University of New York, in conjunction with The Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. See <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5090/>. See also The University of Chicago Libraries Digital Activities and Collections. Kallet and others founded *Consumer Reports* magazine, which by the early 1990s had become a very widely circulating magazine in the U.S., with at least 5,000,000 paid subscribers. Its mission is to help consumers—both in the sense of a buying and an eating population—enhance life. *Consumer Reports* is now also online, with over 2,000,000 subscribers, and is one of the most popular websites for

During those same years, Chicago's "Century of Progress" exhibition showcased such marvels of modern progress as an "Infant Incubator"⁵¹ building and an attraction "called Life...[that] depicted several scenes of prehistoric, embryological, and biological life through charts and pictures, but the highlight of the show was a display of 180 real embryos in progressive stages of development, accompanied by a lecture" (Finding 126). It was so popular—"[t]he total number of paid admissions was slightly less than 23,000,000"—that it after its initial six-month run in 1933, it was resurrected the following year "[w]ith a 1934 attendance of 16,486,377" (Finding 133, 142).⁵² (Ironically, it was built on landfill.⁵³) Ruth deForest Lamb, an FDA official, joined in Kallet and Schlink's biopolitical movement and, in 1936, published *The American Chamber of Horrors: The Truth About Food and Drugs*. (Her title was taken in part from an FDA exhibit.⁵⁴) It is thus fair to say that the same readers who read these exposés and attended such exhibitions were likely to be appropriately shocked by the novel's use of Joe Christmas as a fictional experiment in life at the limits of the human, well beyond the reach of the cultural machinery of kinship. This limit-domain, verging on that of the animal, is not set in opposition to life, but is home to the poor, parentless, animals, mentally ill, Jews, homosexuals, prisoners, soldiers, and nonwhites.⁵⁵ Joe Christmas

independent consumer product safety testing. See <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/aboutus/history/interactive/index.html>.

⁵¹ Source: *Official Guidebook of the Fair*.

⁵² See Robert Bogdan on the 1933-34 Chicago exhibition as well as Adams.

⁵³ See <http://www.chicagohs.org/history/century.html> as well as Finding on the construction of the exhibition.

⁵⁴ See *The American Chamber of Horrors* (116) as well as the FDA's own web archives: http://www.fda.gov/oc/history/slideshow/Slide_158.html.

⁵⁵ There are many 20th-century American examples of biopower such as the Tuskegee experiments in which around 400 poor blacks were infected with syphilis. See James H. Jones; Bradford H. Gray; David J. Rothman; Erving Goffman; Susan E. Lederer; and Jan Rupp.

seems to fit into the first three of these categories, and by implication, ascription, or accusation into the last four as well.⁵⁶

But Christmas, as I have already suggested, is not marked in a way that would allow him to be placed within a category that permits the kind of exchange that positions one socially. Maleness alone won't do it any more than race. The absence of categories that would allow Christmas to settle into a social identity of any sort presents a more fundamental problem, one that troubles the category of the human itself and inspires those who think they know who they are to stigmatize him. On being unable to determine Christmas's race, one minor character puts it: " 'You are worse than [black]. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont ever know. You'll live and you'll die and you wont never know'" (384).⁵⁷ Hortense J. Spillers famously explains that because kinship in the U.S. is determined by the line of the father, the "undecipherable markings" of "[t]he notorious bastard ... [including] Joe Christmas" produce "an 'American Grammar'" (61, 58, 63). Christmas's lack indeed "opens ... [him to a] chaos" of racial assignments (77).⁵⁸ Judith Butler argues further that not only the absence of the normative family triad (Mother-Father-Child) but also any unusual variation on or reconfiguration of kinship produces profound "disruptive effects" to the social body (104).⁵⁹ Her argument rests on the findings of sociologists, anthropologists,

⁵⁶ Christmas does serve briefly in the army; is for much of the novel a fugitive prisoner; is accused constantly of being black or mixed; and Hightower provides Christmas with the alibi that they were sleeping together the night Joanna Burden is killed.

⁵⁷ Faulkner himself repeated this point in 1957, saying that Christmas "deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn't know what he was.... and there was no possible way in life for him to find out" (*Faulkner in the University* 72).

⁵⁸ Source: "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Cheryl A. Wall supplements this argument by finding, in Morrison, a history of lost kinship through and of African American women.

⁵⁹ Source: "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?"

and literary scholars who show that an absence of kinship among African Americans, rather than leaving no mark, acts as the very precondition for the state to seize on and classify a group as sub-normative.

While I accept Spillers's argument that Christmas might well have an African American lineage, I consider it more accurate to say that he demonstrates all the aleatory elements of the multiple body which we simply "wont ever know" (384). Deleuze emphasizes this point when he argues that "[t]he question's [of identity and belonging] got nothing to do with the character of this or that exclusive group, it's to do with the ... relations that ensure that any effects produced in some particular way (through homosexuality, drugs, and so on) *can always be produced by other means* ... [there are] people who think 'I'm this, I'm that' ... [but] I don't know what I am" ("Letter to a Harsh Critic" 11). Because Christmas lacks origins, he is, as Radcliffe-Brown would say, without a "nomenclature of kinship" (qtd. in Harris, 17). However, if we think of him in terms of Agamben's principle of the exception, then agrammaticality is necessary to produce such a nomenclature. Thus the protagonist compels both characters and critics to speculate that his father is black or Mexican. That Christmas is not quite a human, though not an animal either, in a culture that expects him to be both a man and an individual allows him to serve as a template for "the nation's biological body" (*Homo Sacer* 142). Foucault describes "[o]ne [of the] techniques" of biopower as "disciplinary" in that biopower requires and "centers on the body ... as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile" (*Society Must Be Defended* 249). The novel carries out this technique in a strikingly similar fashion: Traveling from "Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back

south again and at last to Mississippi,” working “in turn [as a] laborer, miner, prospector, gambling tout,” as well as alternately starving and eating over 15 years, Christmas’s “body was acquiescing better, becoming docile” (224, 223). His vitality is appropriated by “schools, hospitals, barracks, workshops, and so on” to produce a mass living force (*Society Must Be Defended* 250).

In the McEachern house, as I have suggested, Christmas is defined by “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” (*Homo Sacer* 1). This is also true of the Burden household, the other major domestic space of the novel where women try and fail to incorporate him. What, if anything, is the difference between these two instances of a life so defined? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand why Christmas rejects food in the McEachern household and accepts it in the Burden household. Joanna Burden’s place signals a shift in the terms of bare life. Placed among a mass body of itinerant, poor, starving, workers neither tied to a place nor bound together by anything but their barest needs, Christmas tries to fend for himself.⁶⁰ As he wanders back to Mississippi and stumbles—as if by accident—on the house of Joanna Burden, he slips under cover of night into her kitchen:

[L]ike the cat, he also seemed to see in the darkness as he moved as unerringly toward the food which he wanted as if he knew where it would be; that, or were being manipulated by an agent which did know. He ate something from an invisible dish, with invisible fingers: invisible food. He did not care what it would be. (230)

⁶⁰ See Montag’s “Necro-Economics,” wherein he uses Agamben and Foucault to show that capitalist economics require masses of working poor to starve in order to “maintain the equilibrium of the market” (14).

Christmas cannot help but eat and so he lacks even “care [for] what it would be.” Acting as a cat rather than a dog, the requirements of a body not to starve replaces consciousness of what food even is, much less the desire to know it. Rather than define food by means of the dominant (for humans) sense of sight, he uses a jumble of senses to locate the foodstuff. One could say that “the agent which did know” and of which Christmas is unaware is therefore an unconscious or instinctual one, but this would again be misleading.

Here, the novel makes the point of telling us that certain sensory organs have been displaced by others. Deleuze and Guattari more playfully pose this same problem: “Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, [and] breathe with your belly” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 151)? They argue that “[d]oubtless each organ-machine interprets the entire world from the perspective of its own flux, from the point of view of the energy that flows from it: the eye interprets everything ... in terms of seeing” (*Anti-Oedipus* 6). The modern individual is all “eye”/“I,” an imaginary wholeness in which the protagonist cannot partake.⁶¹ But Christmas, who already identified himself in the regurgitated contents of his stomach as opposed to the face or body of the mother he never witnessed, takes in smell through the mouth and tastes through the eyes. The passage above continues:

He did not know that he had even wondered or tasted until his jaw stopped suddenly in mid-chewing and thinking fled for twentyfive years back down the street...*I'll know it in a minute. I have eaten it before, somewhere. In a minute I will* memory clicking knowing *I see I see I more than see hear I hear I see my head bent I hear the monotonous*

⁶¹ My reference is to Lacan's well-known essay on “The Mirror Stage.” Christmas never really sees himself in the image of an other, and so can neither misrecognize himself as and in an ego, nor become a desiring subject.

dogmatic voice ... I see the indomitable bullet head the clean blunt beard they too bent and I thinking How can he be so nothungry and I smelling my mouth and tongue weeping the hot salt of waiting my eyes tasting the hot steam from the dish 'It's peas,' he said aloud. 'For sweet Jesus. Field peas cooked with molasses.' (emphasis in original, 230)

How can Christmas name and thus know what the food is when he cares neither for food nor for what it is? Christmas remembers the name of the food by association with the McEachern household: "He was thirtythree years old" at the time he meets Miss Burden and so the memory he retrieves is of sometime when he was eight (226). The "monotonous dogmatic voice" of the man with the "bullet head" and "blunt beard" is Mr. McEachern, who was described in exactly those terms when Christmas first saw him at the age of five (141). The "nothungry" man recalls Christmas's competition not to share a meal with his foster father. Then, he was willing to starve or eat like an animal; now, he eats. What for us appears to be a significant difference in his behavior is for Christmas repetition: Once he remembers the food's name, he stops eating, because he will not consume and thus become what McEachern earlier tried to force him to be: a named and culturally interpellated subject.

The thinking and remembering that indicate this minimal level of physical and psychic organization do not imply an integrated human consciousness. The novel describes Christmas's state of mind as he crawled through the kitchen window as one that merely obeys his senses, senses that are like those of a cat but not quite fully animal: "Perhaps he thought of that other window which he had used to use and of the rope upon which he had had to rely [to crawl out of the McEachern's house]; perhaps not. Very likely not, no more than a cat would recall another window" (230). If a human can be

“like” an animal in this respect, then, the novel suggests they exist on a continuum, not on either side of an ontological divide. In modern cultures, human difference presupposes consciousness or language, prompting the test question, “Do animals think? Can they speak?” Faulkner reverses the equation and poses the question of human intentionality in animal terms: “Does Christmas know what he is doing when he crawls like a cat through the window?” The resulting displacement—wherein the text uses a human to ask an animal question—brings the human and animal into closer proximity than a comparison based on similitude. That the novel “do[es] not spare any aspect of physiological life (not even the digestive function, which is obsessively codified and publicized),” indicates that the body and not consciousness constitutes the common ground between man and animal (*Homo Sacer* 135). This is especially true of the body’s alimentary system.⁶² Were Christmas’s intention to think, name, and thus to control the object of that thought, he might be the subject who controls the needs of his body. Framed instead in terms of “[p]erhaps ... [or] perhaps not,” thought, intention, and memory fail to indicate a self-enclosed mind housed in a body that obeys it and is therefore human, distinct and apart from animals. The novel implies that “humans” are defined no longer by their singular subjectivity so much as by their objective multiplicity, or what might more accurately be called a general “humanity.” The point is that while Enlightenment individuals are defined in opposition to nature and by the individual’s command over his or her “own” body, humanity exists in a system of species and

⁶² Elias Canetti, in “Seizing and Incorporation,” agrees that everything is alimentary: “Underneath, day in, day out, is digestion and again digestion. Something alien is seized, cut up into small bits, incorporated into oneself, and assimilated. By this process alone man lives; if it ceases, he dies” (210). My own view departs from his when he goes on to argue that “all the phases of this process ... must have their correspondence in the psyche” (210).

rhizomatic bio-strata that puts them in continuity and connection within and between each other. It is important, in this respect, that Christmas can't fend for himself; he is always dependent on others as they are on him.

What makes Joanna Burden someone whose food he can, on occasion, tolerate? Upon walking in and seeing him eating, she says, “If it is just food you want, you will find that” (231). Joanna relates to him erotically as a mass body. Indeed, she tries to harness the aleatory character of that body in attempting—through food and education—to maximize and regularize the lives of poor southern rural African Americans, which is her family's “black Burden” (247). By aiding and enhancing Christmas's survival through food, a kind of kinship does appear to develop between the two. That Christmas will never play Uncle Tom to Joanna's Emily Shelby is forecast in his food-ways—namely, his understanding of and unwillingness to adopt the names of the food that he knows she “[s]et[s] out for the nigger. For the nigger” (emphasis in original, 238). Joanna impulsively tries to hail the protagonist as black.

His manner of rejecting the language of that food is simultaneously a refusal to occupy the position of either child, adult, or black:

He seemed to watch his hand as if from a distance. He watched it pick up a dish and swing it up and back and hold it there while he breathed deep and slow, intensely cogitant. He heard his voice say aloud, as if he were playing a game: “Ham,” and watched his hand swing and hurl the dish crashing into the wall [...] taking up another one [...] sniffing[....] “Beans or Greens?” [...] “Beans or Spinach?”..... All right. Call it beans.” He hurled it, hard, hearing the crash, waiting...[h]e raised the third dish. “Something with onions,” he said, thinking *This is fun. Why didn't I think of this before?* “Woman's muck.” He hurled it, hard and slow, hearing the crash, waiting[....] “Potatoes,” he said at last, with judicial finality.... “Yes, it's potatoes,” he said, in the preoccupied and oblivious tone of a child playing alone. He could both see and hear this crash[....]

He took up the next dish. "Beets," he said. "I don't like beets, anyhow." (emphasis in original, 238)

It is no accident that Christmas's introduction to the domestic household—first through the McEacherns and here through Joanna—is presented in terms of what Tony L.

Whitehead calls "food behavior," which is "part of a larger cultural complex" and thus "serves other social and cultural functions than the obviously nutritional" (135).

Christmas knows that in feeding him, Joanna is enacting her own ideological fantasy of race, and he won't be gastrointestinally transformed. Whitehead shows that such southern food as "[b]eans or [g]reens" is considered both by poor whites and middle-class African Americans to be "black people's food" (115). "For both middle ... [class] blacks and ... [poor] whites," Whitehead concludes, "the reference to such food as black is an indicator of dietary content as an ethnic marker. For the former, it indicates 'ethnic inclusion'; while for the latter, it indicates 'ethnic exclusion'" (115).

Joanna uses "black people's food" to incorporate Christmas into the black body she secretly desires, which requires her to exclude him from the white community. This gesture of inclusive exclusion is particularly clear in the way she arranges the manner of his entry into her house and reception of her food:

Even after a year ... he would come to the house for the food which she would prepare for him and leave upon the kitchen table. Now and then she would come to the kitchen, though she would never stay with him while he ate, and at times she met him at the back porch...they would stand for a while and talk almost like strangers.... One day he realized that she had never invited him inside the house proper. He had never been further than the kitchen, which he had already entered of his own accord.... And he had never entered the kitchen by day save when he came to get the food she prepared for him and set out upon the table" (233, 234).

This kind of treatment, blatantly racist in its disregard for the more complex level of food preparations and the open entry of company that would likely take place with her own kind, seems so different from the rigid organization and forcible inclusions of the McEachern house. But for Christmas, being included by means of exclusion, first by naming and now by assigning race, is here repeated. By naming each item of food, he pins them to a sign in the same way that Joanna has classified them by selecting “‘black people’s food’” and putting it on plates. While, for Joanna, doing so is an act of border-drawing and difference-making, for Christmas, naming offers a way to cancel out the power of such acts. He does this, we are led to think, to abject not only Joanna’s food but also everything he knows it stands for. Were he to incorporate her food, her racial stereotype would literally be inside him; throwing it is his means of rejecting “the rest of them [her abolitionist family]” (241). An incorporation that might have created kinship ends in a refused identification with the gastric contents that would interpellate him as an object of a specifically racial sympathy. He will not bear Joanna’s “black Burden” any more than he can accept Mrs. McEachern’s dinner or feast on toothpaste.

Sex is like food in the sense that similar principles apply to what can or cannot be allowed into the body. Both eating poison (not food) and being raped with an object (not sex) cause people to vomit in Faulkner. As Christmas eats the dietician’s toothpaste, he witnesses her having sex with a doctor. Because the pinkness of her exposed flesh resembles that of the toothpaste, a number of very fine critics have concluded that the trauma of the primal scene is what compels the boy to vomit each time he confronts the

female genitals.⁶³ But to understand this phenomenon as upward displacement is to ignore the primacy of digestion over sex, sight, or sensation-based consciousness in the novel. The ontogenesis of Christmas's vomiting is not psychological trauma but the poisonous effect of toothpaste in his stomach; the novel tells us that the boy expects punishment for making a disgusting pile on the floor rather than for witnessing the sex act. The novel breaks down the difference between eating and sex by making the latter into just another form of taking in and spitting out.

By engaging in serialized sex with a young black woman, a group of boys create a group identity at once masculine, white, and heterosexual. Christmas, however, fails at his task and so resists all three categories:

His turn came.... There was something in him trying to get out, like when he had used to think of toothpaste.... Then it seemed to him he could see her—something prone, abject; ... he kicked her. (156)

As with his rejection of food, Christmas must fight that which defines him in sexual terms. His action is neither his own nor a kind of repetition compulsion that implies a repressed impulse. He extends his resistance of their brand of masculinity from kicking the girl to fighting the boys: He “struggle[s], fighting, weeping” until “[t]here was no She at all now” (157). The figural outcome is an agglomeration of “heaved, twisting....panting, struggling” bodies, “[n]one of [whom] could see, tell who was who” and that “had completely forgot about the girl, why they had fought, if they had ever

⁶³ See T.H. Adamowski, who argues that every aspect of Christmas's life is traceable to his childhood “experience of woman in the orphanage” (243). Owen Robinson claims, wrongly in my view, that the toothpaste scene links the “original confluence of race, sex, and identity” (126). More recently, Greg Forter makes a similar (and similarly predictable) argument that this scene is “an allegory for how identity is formed” (271). Rather, vomiting makes identity—whether sexual or racial, as well as differential categories—irrelevant. See also Richard Pearce, (277-78).

known” (157). The ensuing corporate tumble so lacks distinctions that the text falls into grammatical indistinction as pronouns cease to differentiate parts: “‘Who is this I’ve got?’ ‘Here; turn loose. Now wait: here he is: Me and-----’ Again the mass of them surged, struggled” (158). The creation of this homogenous yet multiplicitous body instead of one made of individuals continues years later when Christmas succeeds in having sex with a prostitute. Her male clientele mistakenly believes that when Christmas gives her money for food (at the diner where she is a waitress) he is initiating an exchange of money for sex. But Christmas doesn’t know the difference, and so again finds himself unable to join this polyandrous group of men who form around her: moments before copulating with Bobbie, “[h]e vomited” (189). Their relationship positions him not only outside his “own” body but also outside the categories of both men and women.

Christmas understands sex—male and female—strictly in terms of incorporation and excorporation. Indeed, In *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss shows that there is a “profound analogy which people throughout the world seem to find between copulation and eating” (105). Because taking in and spewing out so easily reverse directions for Christmas, they are two versions of the same phenomenon. When his adolescent companions try to explain gender difference in terms of the monthly menses of women, Christmas kills a sheep and places his hands into “the yet warm blood of the dying beast” (185). But by using an animal to grasp “woman,” he undoes the basic difference between life and death as well as the primal difference between inside and outside. Putting his hands into an animal in order to understand what it means to enter a woman’s body reduces slaughter and copulation to the same movement. The fact that Christmas

succeeds in having sex with Joanna cannot make him any more a man than eating her food could make him a “nigger,” if the novel figures their relationship in terms of being swallowed up or spat out.

Sexuality is a form of exchange in which each member of a pair or even group constitutes the other, producing one unit out of difference. This, simply put, is kinship. As Christmas and Joanna’s sexual relationship reaches its denouement, “[i]t merged into the third phase so gradually that [Christmas] could not have said where one stopped and the other began” (261). Arnold Weinstein describes this novelistic phenomenon as “fusion” (*Nobody’s Home* 179). Fusion is a trope that goes beyond mere coupling to constitute something more massive and powerful than its constituent elements. But Christmas cannot be a member of a body that is made of male and female parts, even where those parts are interchangeable:

There was no feminine vacillation, no coyness of obvious desire and intention to succumb at last. It was as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either, and for which they struggled on principle alone.... ‘My God,’ he thought, ‘it was like I was the woman and she was the man.’” (235).

In this encounter with Joanna, gender oppositions do not already exist. Sexual aggression does not make Joanna a man, nor does penetrating her make Christmas one, but it does reveal that Joanna assumes a gendered position and tries, forcibly, to consume Christmas by turning him into the kind of man who can sate her sexual appetite. Christmas feels her attempted interpellation as a “rotten richness ready to flow into putrefaction at a touch” (262). By feigning pregnancy and “beg[inning] to get fat,” Joanna shows that she is full of Christmas (261). But the novel won’t let Christmas participate in any such exchange

and instead immerses him in something resembling the viscera he experienced with Bobbie and the slaughtered animal. That intercourse with Joanna makes him feel “[s]ucked down into a bottomless morass” and places him in a “sewer [that] ran only by night” defines the copulating body as a kind of dumping ground of cultural pollution,⁶⁴ which thwarts Joanna’s attempt to define Christmas as either black, male, husband, father, sexual creature, or receiver of food (260, 256).

I have suggested that Christmas’s multiple body cannot be construed as a failure of consciousness to live within the confines of one body and exercise dominion over it. Whatever it is that he embodies is more basic than the mind/body opposition, which is why, I believe, the novel will not let him die with Joanna. In the figure of the sewer, we have the emergence of “the body ... [based on] nutrition, digestion, and energies” that thus “inhibit[s] the formation of any form of identity” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 155, 162). Mary Douglas’s figure of rubbish points to much the same phenomenon: “The origin of various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish” (*Purity and Danger* 160). In becoming part of the mass, component parts lose their integrity and become something else. Joanna’s death preserves her identity. For her, food and sex are, respectively, a creation and transgression of boundaries rather than their dissolution.⁶⁵ In the case of Christmas, we might say that by

⁶⁴ See Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”

⁶⁵ In “Taboos Related to Reproduction,” Georges Bataille argues that “man is defined by having his sexual behavior subject to rules and precise restrictions. Man is an animal who stands abashed in front of death or sexual union. He may be more or less abashed, but in either case his reaction differs from that of other animals” (50). Agamben picks up on this claim to say that “[i]n this way, Bataille immediately exchanges the political body of” bare life “which is inscribed in the logic of exception” for a body “defined instead by the logic of transgression” (113). The mistake that Agamben identifies in Bataille indicates where so many readings of Christmas go wrong when critics read his relationship with Joanna in terms of race. For them, as for Joanna, a racial fantasy finds what it needs in their coupling to take root and grow: The novel

escaping the categories Joanna would impose on him, he maintains his status as a part of “a living mass” (*Society Must Be Defended* 249).

The novel keeps Christmas “alive when, in biological terms, [he] should have been dead long ago” given what his body endures (*Society Must Be Defended* 248).⁶⁶ That the novel, like Foucault’s model of biopower, “is centered not upon the body [which dies] but upon life [which goes on]” immediately raises such questions about “the biological multiplicity” as to how it is made to endure (249, 252). Human life, as it normatively reproduces, depends on difference. To Gayle Rubin, reproduction must imagine a pre-social difference between male (exchanger) and female (object of exchange). Nancy Chodorow shows how “mothering” reproduces daughters who then become domestically laboring wives to publicly working men (327). Thus reproduction naturalizes not only the sex/gender system, but also one’s position in relation to other kinds of difference: “Male” and “female” are the basis for the reproduction of socio-economic classes. What else is Engels’ tale of the family’s origin if not the story of the transition from polygamy to monogamy in terms of women’s duty to be housed in the domestic sphere and reproduce bourgeois subjects? At the limit of class differences, men

suggests that “[i]t was as if she had invented the whole thing [his being supposedly black] deliberately, for the purpose of playing it out like a play” (259). Joanna reveals her erotic investment in the breaking of a taboo against a fantasized miscegenation when she shouts, on climaxing, the words, “Negro! Negro! Negro!” (260). Joanna uses sex, much as she uses food, to instate a kinship system based on racial difference. Thus Bataille’s logic *does* work but only where it comes to Joanna’s side of the sexual relationship.

⁶⁶ Foucault argues that the older forms of power over life made “spectacular manifestation[s]” of death (248). The way in which Christmas’s body is mortified is a kind of lynching. In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (2006), Jacqueline Goldsby writes that the killing of Christmas suggests that “Faulkner aligns southern racism with German fascism to map the global reach of lynching’s mass appeal” (289). But in Foucauldian terms, because the (early modern) spectacle of lynching is enclosed within the private space of the (modern) home, Grimm’s overkill—he shoots Christmas five times and castrates him—is in fact a failed attempt to pin Christmas to a modern (racial and sexual) stereotype and is thus a failure to kill.

and women not only make more bourgeois selves, they also make more ethnic ones: exogamy ends at the limits of the kin group.

Contrary to difference-based reproduction, Foucault's notion of life imagines a body that extends itself rhizomatically. Like Christmas, who is its bearer, life is neither a productive (economic) power nor a reproductive (social) power. Wherever there is nourishment to be taken in and no force to curtail its extension, life will move into that domain. Where life is only a general biological humanity that is not completely distinct from the animal life and food consumption by means of which it extends itself, individual bodies and the groups they form are bodies that don't matter. Christmas, as I've argued, is linked to the most basic digestive energies of existence and as such is available to the entire population of the novel. So, too, is Lena Grove. Unable to form a family of any kind, Lena corresponds in most every way to Christmas. From the beginning, she is without kin and "wears no wedding ring" (12). Like him, she is defined by a lack of history, an obfuscation of kinship, and an itinerant existence: "'She is a stranger'" with "[a] body [that] does get around" (319, 30, 507). Neither alliance, descent, nor exchange matter to Lena: She is willing to take on Byron Bunch as a kind of surrogate husband and father not out of obligation, but simply because he's there. Their meeting is contingent on his being at the right place at the right time, when, in her search for the father of her baby, Lena mistakes—by one letter—the name Bunch for the surname of one possible father of her baby: Burch.

Power Ignores Death

In contrast to the modern individual, the mass body does not perpetuate itself through reproduction or end in death but seeks to continue living in whatever form and by whatever means are available. Rather than create a social body of white men such as Percy Grimm or domestic women such as Joanna Burden, the novel validates a social body made of creatures neither raced nor gendered. The life Christmas embodies ends only insofar as we are willing to force him into an identity as the white male community does. Instead of acting out liberal individualism's imperative to "turn differences into otherness and otherness into scapegoats" that the individual disavows as part of itself, the novel uses Christmas to invalidate difference as the basis of the individual and thus a society composed of individuals (*Identity/Difference* 67). The novel shows there is no such society that can succeed in scapegoating Christmas as a polluting body to be kept out because it is Christmas who keeps out all those who try and make him into an identifiable body. Since he cannot be so forced, the white men's attempt to kill him produces not a categorical overkill but an excess of life that spreads

in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant (465).

To Deleuze, "[t]he life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal or external life, that is, from

the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens” (“Immanence: A Life” 28).⁶⁷ In realizing that he can continue without an individual body, Christmas attains a kind of “peace and unchaste and quiet, until suddenly the true answer comes to him.... ‘I don’t have to bother about having to eat anymore,’ he thinks. ‘That’s what it is’” (338). By not having to eat, Christmas accedes to a life without sustenance, but this does not mean he dies. “[F]reed from the accidents of internal or external life,” he no longer has to deal with the aleatory nature of the mass body that induces him to excorporate all those agents who would use it for their purposes (“Immanence: A Life” 28).

Christmas can’t be killed, since he “dies” just after Lena’s baby is born. In this sense, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the baby is Christmas himself. If we are unsure as to the parentage of Lena’s baby, and even more uncertain as to her own family line, then that baby is in the same position as Christmas at his conception and birth, with one key repetition: the baby remains unnamed. Mrs. Hines not only confuses Lena’s baby with her own grandson, Joey, but also confuses Christmas with the father of Lena’s baby. Lena says of this phenomenon: “ ‘I get mixed up and it’s like sometimes I cant-----like I am mixed up too and I think that his pa is that Mr-----Mr Christmas too-----’” (409). Such confusion makes the point that Christmas lives, through Lena, as the principle of the exception to the system of differences that is the precondition for kinship. The repetition rather than reproduction of the protagonist’s life suggests this principle

⁶⁷ For Agamben’s reading of Deleuze’s notion of “a life,” see his *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (228-239). In addition, see Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, for a reading that implicitly links Faulkner’s repetition of the generic term “whatever” to Agamben’s notion of “whatever being” as life free of all identifiable properties (1-2, 19, 67, and 86-87).

spreads throughout the mass body, turning the prerogative of bare life from a lack of kinship into a positive extension of life.

Whereas Christmas's encounters with food, sex, and naming set others outside and apart from the body, serving to individuate them, Lena's encounters take others into the body and extend their life. As the positive side of bare life, she differs from Christmas in one key respect. While he operates as a negative principle who enters the social body only to reject differences and cancel out kinship relations, she transforms multiple fathers into the principle of "[b]are life [which] is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category.... [but] ... dwells in the biological body of every living being" (*Homo Sacer* 140). From this perspective, even the "race" of any father only operates as a difference within human sameness. Like those other social categories, such as gender, Foucault explains that race is only a means of "introducing a break into the domain of life" which in Lena's body is continuous (*Society Must Be Defended* 254). The mass body doesn't require differences to thrive.

How might we imagine a social body without internal differences? By creating figures such as Christmas, who negates difference, and Lena, who incorporates differences within a single body, the novel imagines a way of being "before" representation, when we "aint named ... yet" (410). Rather than an absence, the death of difference becomes a positive thing because the differences that define individuals and the groups they form depend on exclusions.⁶⁸ What holds the living mass together if it cannot be defined in these terms? None of whom it is made—Christmas, Lena, and also Hightower and Byron Bunch—have families or are members of communities. They are

⁶⁸ See Wendy Brown (67, 100).

not what Wendy Brown means by “sovereign, self-made, and privatized subjects” (113). Hightower cannot accept marriage because “to him it was not men and women in sanctified and living physical intimacy, but a dead state ... [of] two shadows chained together with the shadow of a chain” (480). Like Hightower’s “composite of all the faces which he has ever seen,” these figures act as placeholders not for categories but for the most general possible way of thinking about life outside the reproduction of men, women, marriage, religion, race, the household, town, community, and family (491). Lena in particular is a placeholder for every being that tries to live “before” being named and thus induced to observe boundaries. Instead of reproducing a family or living in a house where she never had one, Lena stays on the road and keeps “traveling.... [with no] idea of finding whoever it was she was following.... she had [n]ever aimed to ... she had just made up her mind to travel a little further and see as much as she could” (506). To borrow Deleuze’s metaphor, she won’t “go for the root, [but] follow[s] the canal” (“Introduction: Rhizome” 19). In not being defined by where she did not come from anyway, Lena turns this double negative into a positive form that links the living mass in its collectively generic rather than individually important “character.”

CHAPTER 2

One or Several Djuna Barnes: The Problem of Gender

Critics of Djuna Barnes have tended to interpret her artistic production in three related ways: by reducing the text to the author, reducing the author to her sexuality, and reducing her sexuality to her family history, or Oedipal situation.¹ The complexity of such novels as *Ryder* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1937) has consequently been boiled down to individual fragments of psycho-biographical “evidence” for purposes of proving that within the text reside the indelible traces of a lesbian author from a dysfunctional family, indeed one whose lesbianism and writing are outcomes of a non-normative upbringing. In this way, a tradition of Barnes criticism turns the life history of the author and her fiction into a unitary genealogy whose origin is located within the modern family and whose pathology is sexual.² *Nightwood* cannot be so easily reduced to what Gilles Deleuze calls “the daddy-mommy-me triangle,” which excludes as recidivist, atavistic, primitive or simply irrational most every form of thought and embodiment that isn’t

¹ Susan Edmunds summarizes this tendency, when she writes that “[i]n her first novel, *Ryder* ... Djuna Barnes recasts her own family history as the story of the freewheeling Ryder family, whose outrageous actions at once parody and overturn the conventions of middle-class domestic fiction (218).

² For a major study of the mid-century American family, see Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales’s *Family: Socialization and Interaction Process*. And for their assessment of the nuclear family as a highly specialized crucible of difference on which further social differences are elaborated, see their concluding chapter on “Levels of Cultural Generality and the Process of Differentiation” (353-399).

traceable back to that triangle and thus resists being narrativized in familiar terms (“Psychoanalysis and the Familialism: The Holy Family,” 51). The novel cannot be so reduced, refusing, as it does, to create a stable definition of human kinship within which sexual individuation, much less individuation as one consciousness, can take place.

The novel is composed, I want to argue, of multiplicities of thought and embodiment that trace complex and dispersed paths along which origins, knowledge and identity become irrelevant in the face of the possibilities afforded by replication, imitation, and anonymity. Where the Volkbein family is concerned, the novel names this an attempt “to span the impossible gap” (3) between a lack of origins and a world whose rules pertaining to one’s family—or kinship—makes one into a member of some recognizable national, racial, gendered, or classed group. But as I will show, when it comes to such rules, Barnes performs something much like what Jean-François Lyotard calls “the jubilation which result[s] from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other” (*Postmodern Condition* 80).

True, a few of the novel’s characters are obsessed with notions of heredity, descent, and reproduction.¹ But to ask after such heredity is to search for knowledge of

¹ Michel Foucault shows that the multiplicity of sexuality was subjected, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, to scientific reason for purposes of regulating behavior, prescribing norms, identifying deviations, and, ultimately, reproducing individuals by both cultural and biological means. Barnes was clearly aware of the discourses of sexology that were proliferating before and during the time she wrote and published *Nightwood*. O’Connor makes reference to sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s then-progressive notion of an intermediary sex when he claims of Robin that she resembles the “third sex” (148) who is neither male, female, heterosexual, nor exactly, homosexual. We might say that this novel incorporates what Michael Trask, in *Cruising Modernism*, calls “pervert modernism,” which, broadly construed, includes the ideas of sexologists, social scientists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, anthropologists, and literary artists. But the critical difference between such literary artists as Djuna Barnes and the so-called scientists of sexuality is that those who subjected sex to reason tried to classify and control the unpredictable movements of multiplicity precisely because it “defied categorization” and partook of “desire[s] that baffled fulfillment” (18). For such literary artists as Barnes, Trask shows, “[i]n the cognitive geography of the new century ... there was no [such] solid ground” (18).

an origin and an identity, all of which the novel withholds. Barnes is interested in something else—she thinks of her characters not as “copies” of an “original” but as characterizations of multiplicity. In this way, she refuses to individuate her characters, making it pointless to read them in terms of categories of the biological and social reproduction of individuals. Doing so enables her to turn the individual from modern society’s basic unit into a subtraction from a much larger and un-definable entity that is made up of every un-actualized potential for thought and embodiment. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri try and actualize such potential linguistically by calling it “*the ... multitude*” (my emphasis, *Empire* 60). Yet their use of the definite article, which both designates an object and makes it singular, contradicts their point that multiplicity is “in perpetual motion” (60). Such motion, after all, is un-contradictory and un-dialectical, for it does “not [act] as a negative that constructs a positive to any dialectical resolution. Rather it acts as an absolutely positive force that pushes the dominant[...] toward an abstract and empty unification, to which it appears as a distinct alternative” (62). I prefer to use the term multiplicity, a term both free of the definite article and whose suffix indicates the quality of being multiple rather than a single object or mind that is many.

The Volkbeins, whose story opens the novel, serve as a model for all those bodies who, in the novel’s terms, “had done everything to span the impossible gap” (3) between those who identify with roots and those like Guido Volkbein, who remain connected to the rhizomatic mass that slips through the dominant histories it “cannot inherit” (7). Like the Volkbeins—whose “origins” are apocryphal—none of the novel’s characters have genealogical affiliations, or origins within lines of identifiable hereditary descent. Barnes privileges characters that are (possibly) Jewish, Irish and American. She does so,

I want to suggest, for purposes of telling a story that runs counter to Anglo-European notions of the hereditary originality of kinship. “Cut off from their people by accident or choice,” the novel’s wandering characters “find that they must inhabit a world whose constituents, being alien, force [them] to succumb to an imaginary populace” (3). While the novel does suggest that there is a “people” from whom the Volkbeins are “cut off,” and its name is Jewish, her selection of such a group allows her to arrange a novel according to the principle of dispersion rather than roots. Much like the meandering, nomadic, object-less movement of thought that Deleuze endorses in “Nomad Thought,” Barnes’s characters challenge the very existence of the representational means by which their movement is stopped, formed into categories, and solidified into knowledge.²

Nightwood makes the search for knowledge of one’s identity and origins into a detour from its own rhizomatic spread. Without an object over which to ponder, the novel makes searching for who or even what one is and where one has come from irrelevant. In celebrating a multiplicity of misbegotten itinerant wanderers, the novel never sets such wanderers *against* origins that would define them as pollutants. Without the kind of history within which characters can be assigned individual positions—as mother, father, wife, husband, son, daughter, and so forth—the novel turns them into a composite and multiple body. As I will show, the novel “includes” the differences we associate with individual identity in order to experiment with the novel form itself.³

² In Deleuze’s terms, nomad thought resists “legal, contractual, or institutional codes,” acting instead “as a dynamic flux” (146).

³ Suzanne Clark argues, in *Sentimental Modernisms*, that “many modernist women ... rejected the domestic tradition” because modernists rejected the femininity and sentimentality associated with the home (29, 4). Barnes certainly fits in this tradition. Barbara Johnson, in “My Monster/My Self,” uses Mary Shelley to make a point apropos of Barnes, namely, that both demonstrate “the possibility that a woman can write [something] that would *not* exhibit ‘the amiableness of domestic affection,’ the possibility that for

Appropriating the Author

Perhaps because of the novel's resistance to identifiable narrative formats, which Tyrus Miller calls its "troubling lack of coherence and legibility" (*Late Modernism* 147), Barnes's critics feel compelled to impose narratives of family, nation, race, class, gender, subjectivity and related categories of individual and group identity onto *Nightwood*.⁴ It is virtually impossible to find a Barnes critic who is not a biographical critic. For decades, they have responded to the challenge of finding a narrative in a novel that refuses to yield to explanation in terms of biographical snippets about Barnes's sexuality and family.⁵ While he does not exactly pathologize the author's sexuality, D.A. Miller, in *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, for all his critical self-consciousness, exemplifies a trend that has arguably shaped and continues to shape the debate over Djuna Barnes and her art. Miller claims that

in the evidence of Roland Barthes's gayness is the opportunity it affords for staging this imaginary relation between us, between those lines on which we each in writing them may be thought to have put our bodies—for fashioning thus an intimacy with the writer whom (above all when it comes to writing) I otherwise can't touch. (7)

women as well as men the home can be the very site of the *unheimlich*" (154). Indeed, Kannestine claims that Barnes's novel *Ryder*, not unlike *Nightwood*, represents "the death of the ... domestic novel of generations that had dominated the nineteenth century" (36).

⁴ See Kaviola; Edmunds; Trubowitz; Marcus; Boone; Martins; and Blyn for representative examples of identity-category based readings of *Nightwood*.

⁵ One of the few critics to resist this trend in favor of reading *Nightwood* for "figure[s] for the suspension of human personhood as such" is Justus Nieland (*Feeling Modern* 220). Tyrus Miller, like Nieland, would seem to be another exception—he "sets aside the biographical approach" (146). But no doubt because "the biographical approach" enjoys such a long history—is the history—of *Nightwood*, he feels compelled to claim that *Nightwood* is "closely, even passionately linked to Barnes's biographical situation" (*Late Modernism* 145).

Barbara Johnson, in “Bringing Out D.A. Miller,” is thus able to claim that “[Miller’s] book is about a missed encounter with Barthes. But in some ways it is also about the structuring role of the changing desire for one” (4). The desire to encounter the author through writing if not through the body allows the critic to shape the relation between text and author. Such a relation is not only aesthetic, as Miller suggests, but also political because, as Johnson shows, it induces us to ask “[w]here ... the authority in the novel come[s] from?” (7). Miller’s desire for an encounter with the author serves to establish the source and authority of textual production in the sexual experience of the author outside of writing, that is, “in the evidence of Roland Barthes’s gayness,” or sexual object choice, itself (7).

The desire for intimacy with an author can act as a desire to touch the body that writes, but such contact is mediated by the writing done by that body. Much like Miller, critics of Barnes seek to bypass the complexity of her text in favor of the simplicity of touching the author. To do so, they imagine the author’s desire so as to appropriate the object of that desire—desiring the same object that an author desires being just a way of encountering the author through the object. But Barnes will not allow us to ground ourselves in an encounter with one author in the “personal” space of her mind and other such ostensibly “private” bodily spaces as her bedroom—whether those in her texts or life. Instead, as I will argue, Barnes uses *Nightwood* for purposes of imagining a larger collectivity where thinking and embodiment are not differentiated and individuated—as they are in the Oedipal genealogy of the individual subject—but connected and expansive. The novel connects far more bodies and minds than can be contained, much

less explained, by a reading that assumes her work and life are the product of a single authorial “I” with a distinct sexuality originating in one family history.

Sexuality is the cultural category most often privileged by Barnes’s biographers, editors, and critics as the origin of her authority. In some cases, sexuality acts as the means to divide Barnes from her writing in order to show how the novel is the expression of the author’s desire; in most cases, the novel is read as a symptomatic resolution to problems in Barnes’s own sexual life and family history. On the basis of such divisions it is possible to identify her sexual object with her text—getting in touch with the sexuality of *Nightwood* would be to touch Barnes herself. Thus the thing that gives form to the author’s desire is the very thing that cannot possibly overcome difference, as the novel is the object of its expression. Barnes’s biographers and critics move compulsively to her sexuality as that which drives her to write novels and gives *Nightwood* its aesthetic allure.

A brief examination of the novel’s publishing history as well as criticism pertaining to the biographical elements of *Nightwood* suggests both why this way of reading Barnes is dominant and why it is necessary, in my view, to move beyond it. Such material will also prove instructive when I come to explain how the novel uses its characters, paradoxically, to reveal that they do not represent individuals but present the interconnectedness that defines their multiplicity. We might indeed think of Barnes’s project as aligned with Gilles Deleuze’s endeavor systematically to disprove the Freudian claim that there is “nothing but Oedipus” with “multiplicities of every variety” (“One or Several Wolves” 34, 35). For now, let us understand why the biographical boilerplate leaves its mark in scholarship and the tradition of the novel into which Barnes is being inserted. Her life and work make it simply too tempting to look to her sexuality, family

history and early childhood experiences—that is, to her psycho-biography—for the explanatory logic of both.⁶

More Than I

In *Leonardo DaVinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), Freud set the tone and style of what was to become several generations of psychologically informed biographical criticism, which Freud himself terms the “pathography” of the artist (91). Infantile sexuality, childhood experiences, relations with parents and authority figures—in short, the Oedipal drama—are to Barnes’s biographers and critics what fragments from DaVinci’s childhood are to Freud: the origin or source that illuminates art in “penetrating the most fascinating secrets of human nature” (92), secrets that to Freud are born of family, in particular, childhood.⁷ In acting as the point of entry for the psychoanalytic interpretation of the subject, pathology is necessary to make the subject whole again—by making him into a subject of consciousness and self-control. Individuation is the “cure” for pathology insofar as it promises to rid the patient of that which cannot be subjected to such control. In the case of “The Wolf Man” (1918), Freud attempts to take the “contrary component instincts” which “exist side by side with all the other” aspects of his patient’s “incessant vacillation” in life and tries to turn them into “a fixed character,” or self-

⁶ For a representative example, see Julie Abraham, *Are Girls Necessary?: Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (122-38).

⁷ As Freud puts it in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918)—otherwise known as the case of “The Wolf Man”—such “factors in the childhood of the individual” (257) as “observing parental intercourse” (256) serve as the primal source of the individual’s nature and thus “*play a decisive part in determining whether and at what point the individual shall fail to master the real problems of life*” (212). Though this work was published eight years after the DaVinci piece, Freud found it necessary to continue both to establish and defend a psycho-biographical approach to the individual’s early family history as a superior means to access knowledge—and, we might add, to tell a story. See “The Wolf Man” (211).

contained unity (183). In doing the same thing—in treating Barnes’s fiction as if it were a sick patient who is both partial and excessive because multiple rather than a single unified self—Barnes’s critics completely overthrow what they consider the illogic of her fiction.

In 1983, Andrew Field published a biography of Djuna Barnes called *Djuna: The Life and Times of Djuna Barnes*, in the U.S. and in Canada.⁸ Field writes that just as “[a] dream of a bird was central to Freud’s analysis in his *Leonardo DaVinci* ... [so too] Barnes has these ‘horrid birds’ of childhood both in her writing and in her illustrations” (29), in particular in her first major novel, *Ryder*. For Field, as for most every reader of Barnes, *Ryder* “is the whole psychic life story of Djuna Barnes” (30). The use of details from the author’s childhood by biographers and the critics who depend on their research—in particular their use of her sexual object choices and early childhood influences—created an aura of mystery around the author. Since then, scholars and critics have picked up on Field’s Freudian logic, using Barnes’s apparently risqué pansexualism to read her work both as the expression of her life, and as the sublimation of what Field calls “[h]er complicated family history” which “would feed and gnaw at her all her life [and] would supply the basis of her art” (13).⁹

Barnes’s second biographer, photographer Hank O’Neal, also selects *Ryder* as a guide to reading *Nightwood*, as “various characters in the narrative,” he writes in the foreword to the former novel, “are easily traced to Miss Barnes’ immediate family” (xi).

⁸ Another edition was published around the same time in England under the title *Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes*. The catchier second title was adopted in the follow-up U.S. edition two years later. Source: the publisher’s front matter of the U.S. edition.

⁹ Tyrus Miller suggests that *Nightwood* demonstrates that “by late modernity, at least, [there remained only] the inescapable satiric shadow of any modernist appeal to depth (164).

True, *Ryder* does provide abundant material for a psycho-biographical study of the author and her art as the sublimation of her early family life simply because it is full of conflicts between mothers and fathers, parents and children, and men and women; its protagonist, Wendell Ryder, is highly androgynous; and it includes chapters that deal with sex, rape, incest, bestiality, homosexuality, polyandry, and polygamy. Inasmuch as it includes every conceivable violation of the normative Oedipal (kinship) relations that distinguish humans from animals and family members from each other, *Ryder* should discourage Barnes's critics from reading *Nightwood* as a family history.

But a large number of permutations of Oedipal violations only serves to keep things in the family and to license critics to situate it at the source both of Barnes's and her work's identity. O'Neal has all he needs, in his biographical memoir (published in 1990), in order to read the author's life into "sexual" categories (xiii) that yield a seamy account suggesting that the possibility the author might have slept with heterosexual married men is the most intriguing thing about her lesbianism. In the reclusivity O'Neal equates with Barnes's bedroom experiences reside the family secrets that gave rise to the sexual life of a brilliant writer who—by the accounts of all her biographers—wanted little more than to be left alone and unidentified.¹⁰ Indeed, Barnes refused to be defined as heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual. That refusal—to declare a sexual object choice of any kind—makes her sexuality indeterminate, potential, multiple, and the most queer thing about her. Her desire for privacy—she vigorously guarded all attempts to release or

¹⁰ To be fair, Barnes deliberately created something of a mystery of her life in that she lived out her latter days as a recluse in Greenwich Village after the glory days of Paris; and while in Paris, she ran around in "a long opera cape originally owned by Peggy Guggenheim" with a coterie whom Sheri Benstock portrays in splendid detail in *Women of the Left Bank* (230).

publish personal information about her life—fuels the mystery of her sexuality and family history as portrayed by professional biographers and memoirists. A minor cottage industry has grown around speculating, investigating, and even recreating the family experiences as that which presumably offer the key to her identity and writing alike.

Philip Herring, Barnes's most recent biographer (1995), aims to expose the horror at the heart of the author's family life as the true motive of her art.¹¹ Before he could "teach *Nightwood*" and "before [he] could understand the novel" (xx), "[he] believed, [he] had to understand Djuna Barnes" herself (xxi). To do so, he boiled down her complex life and literary production into the most "basic" of Oedipal histories he could get hold of—what Freud would call a "primal scene"—for purposes of showing how fiction became the author's means to avenge herself on her family:

Born in a log cabin on a mountain overlooking the Hudson River, Djuna was the second child in her family. Living with her was her grandmother, Zadel Barnes, whose philosophy of free love led to a sequence of disasters that divide her family to this day: letters point to a possible sexual affair [of Djuna] with her grandmother and to Djuna's claim that her virginity was taken in a violent rape at sixteen when her father brought a middle-aged neighbor to introduce her formally to the pleasures of the boudoir. Or was the neighbor perhaps really the father? Or was it the brother of the father's mistress? Something terrible enough to cause bitterness for a lifetime happened to Djuna Barnes at an early age, but precisely what may never be known. (xvi)

By virtue of his salacious speculations about possible incestuous relations, Herring, like Freud, creates a familiar variety of high-brow biographical porn by assuming that Barnes

¹¹ As I hope to be implying, the game of one-upmanship played by Barnes's biographers and critics—in terms of who can get to the "real," the "true," the "one and only" Djuna—is much like the process of getting at the real thing that Phillip Barrish describes in *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880-1995*. Indeed, Herring openly aims not only to supplement, but also to correct the "disorganized, incomplete, and conceptually flawed" biographies of Field and O'Neal (xxi) so as to show that he can show Djuna even better than O'Neal's Field's version of Freud or O'Neals photographic representations of the author. See Barrish (128-58).

was “powerless in life” and needed to use “her art [to] pa[y] back ravishment in kind, in a series of creative acts the execution of which she said were all that kept her from suicide” (xvii). Moreover, Barnes’s novels are “autobiographical ... family history[ies] cloaked in experimental style but clearly based on fact. [*Ryder*] ends with a polygamous father stumbling about at night in the company of beasts, on whose sexual behavior he had based his disastrous natural philosophy” (xvii). Art, in this view, is a response to rape (if not worse), in much the same way that, for Freud, DaVinci’s creative output was a response to “a vulture” that “opened [his] mouth with its tail, and struck [him] many times with its tail against [his] lips” (*Leonardo* 32). Just as Freud replaces the vulture’s tail with the mother’s kisses, and makes those kisses the source of the mysteriously smiling women of DaVinci’s paintings, so too do Barnes’s biographers read her artistic twists on kinship and the family as displacements of incestuous experiences.

Given the tenacity of the Oedipal reading of Barnes’s fiction, one has to wonder if the secret of Barnes’s sexuality is not a snare set by the artist, a possibility to which Herring himself alludes in claiming that “this important writer had eluded us modernists so completely that her textual strategies continued to perform tricks while she hid behind a curtain of obscurity, smiling at our gropings” (xxi). Herring’s figure of an author smiling at her critics’ frustrated desire to touch her implies that a novel just might be designed to trick its critics into reading psychologically and exegetically rather than tactically.¹² Considering her concern with privacy and her apparent desire to get as far

¹² In *The Culture of Redemption*, Leo Bersani describes this phenomenon at work in the scholarship of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which, through its “trickery and cunning,” turns “textual research ... [into] an investigation into real lives” and induces the critic to replace creative interpretation with the endless

from her family as possible, it would not be surprising if Barnes were indeed laughing at the thwarted “gropings” of those attempting to reduce *Nightwood* if not to family, then to Barnes’s affair with Thelma Wood, on the grounds that the affair allowed her to act out her sexually tumultuous childhood.¹³ Instead, I would use the words of one of the novel’s most wily characters, O’Connor, to suggest that he is to the novel what Barnes is to her critics: someone who “must ... like careful writers, guard [him]self against the conclusions of [his] readers” (94), namely, against readers who claim to know the real O’Connor once and for all.

In addition to the biographical history of the artist, all the novel’s editorial incarnations following the 1937 U.S. publication edited and introduced by T.S. Eliot rely on the originality of Oedipal sexuality in order to “out” Barnes (the novel was first published a year earlier in England). An edition of *Nightwood* published by the Modern Library in 2000 replaces T.S. Eliot’s introduction with Dorothy Allison’s. No stranger to family trauma, Allison not only re-Americanizes the novel but also lends an aura of lesbian authenticity to it, suggesting, in much the same way that Freud speculated about DaVinci’s possible homosexuality, that lesbianism is the means to sublimate, in art, a painful childhood where the parents were either too absent or too near. Perhaps because of her admitted awareness of Barnes’s “stubborn refusal ... to define her own sexuality or

“exegesis of *Ulysses* itself” (156, 158, 170). See Goldman, who shows just how exhaustive—and exhausting—this kind of scholarship can be.

¹³ For evidence of such acting out, critics often point to a scene in *Nightwood* where Thelma has a nightmarish dream about a “room [that] was taboo” (62) and in which her “grandmother was dressed as a man” and she “recall[s] ... her childhood” (63), as if this were analogous to Barnes’s dubiously incestuous relation with her grandmother. At the very least, we can say that the way of reading that assumes a one-to-one correspondence between the author and her fiction is taken for granted by even the best critics of the novel. For example, Marcus writes that “Thelma Wood [was] Djuna Barnes’s lover and the model for the character of Robin Vote in the novel” (92).

categorize her world or her writing in any gender-based system” (xvii), Allison goes to the opposite extreme, naming the novel “a book about lesbians.... [that] should reveal something ... particularly lesbian” (xiv). Thus Allison does for Barnes what she could not but “should” have done for herself: If unwilling to claim herself a lesbian, then at least—or so Allison’s imposition of obligation implies—Barnes should come out and admit that her novel is a lesbian text. In forcefully establishing lesbianism as the authorial compromise, sourced in childhood, between trauma and art, Allison imputes to the artist what her texts deliberately occlude. Another edition from New Directions, released in the fall of 2006, includes Eliot’s introduction but seals the novel’s alignment in a psycho-biographically inflected tradition of lesbian writing with a new preface by Jeannette Winterson.¹⁴

Thus the history of *Nightwood* can be read as an unwilling admission—if not a sustained disavowal—that there are simply too many “Djunas” for her critics to read as one. Indeed, the most complicated editorial attempt to condense the author and her work into a single identity reveals an unintentional consequence of doing so. In Cheryl Plumb’s “Introduction” to the Dalkey Archive Press edition of *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts* (1995), she writes that “Djuna Barnes referred to *Nightwood* as ‘my life with Thelma’” (ix). Plumb records that in October 1936 “Barnes [wrote] Coleman [a fellow novelist, friend, and editor of Barnes] of her discovery that the title was Thelma’s name: ‘Nigh T. Wood—low, thought of it the other day. Very odd’” (ix). But this statement ascribes to Barnes an after-the-fact unconscious motive for what was

¹⁴ While Winterson claims that “like all the best books, [*Nightwood’s*] power makes nonsense of any categorization, especially of gender and sexuality” (ix), she contradicts this claim by summing up the novel as “a bleak picture of love between women” (xi).

in the estimation of Barnes's biographers a title approved if not chosen by T.S. Eliot himself. Indeed this tidbit from Barnes's letter is interesting for more than its associative psycho-linguistic insight, since it reveals that Barnes's title preceded and perhaps produced her recognition of her lover's influence. In this respect, Barnes thinks of her life as the product of her fiction—fiction that confounds easy reduction to sexual identity.

The fact that Roland Barthes establishes as fact this same reversal in his essay, "From Work to Text," makes him far better company for Barnes than those who have kept her locked in a (family) closet from which they try and free her authentic self.¹⁵

Barthes suggests that through the process of writing, the author

becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary) ... [that] allows their lives to be read as a text. The word 'bio-graphy' re-acquires a strong, etymological sense, at the same time as the sincerity of the enunciation ... becomes a false problem: the *I* which writes the text, it too, is never more than a paper-*I*. (161)

In persuading a generation of critics that fiction produces its author rather than the other way around, Barthes spelled the end, or so one would think, of the biographical fallacy.

The assumption that the novel somehow expresses an author who exists prior to such self-expression authorizes biographical readings of fictional texts as displaced confessions of the author's sexuality. To turn text into such a document is to reverse the

¹⁵ In the case of sexuality, the logic of identity often works in terms of what Johnson calls "a conversion narrative," in which one comes out of the closet and not into freedom, but into the trap of identity. "[A]ll classic coming out stories," whether those produced by the person coming out or the person outing another individual, she suggests, rely on the assumption that "I once was fake but now I'm real" (5).

priority of text over author, as if the novel were the copy and the author the original.¹⁶ Demonstrating that, in the case of *Nightwood*, such a reversal is not easy to perform, the Dalkey edition contains an elaborate textual apparatus and emendations to the novel that add up to more pages than the novel itself. The prefatory material claims to have “base[d] the selection of copy-text on the text closest to the author’s hand, on the rationale that this text most closely reflects the author’s final intention” (xx). Even the little marks Barnes herself left on the typescript are reprinted as if they were always meant to be there and provide access to traces of her body.¹⁷ But rather than act as part of the original, this apparatus reestablishes the priority of a fantasmatic original over copy, an original that—as Barnes uses her fiction to suggest of her family life—was never there, and so never lost in the first place.

Unidentifying the Author

Barnes, in my view, is still being shamed out of a closet that she was never in. That closet not only supposedly contains and thus requires the release of a lesbian author, but also serves to explain away her artistic production as both the sublimation and unresolved residue of an Oedipal complex. Judith Butler refuses to endorse such practices when she claims, in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” that outing the “I” as lesbian and tracing its source back to family dynamics actually cancels out sexuality

¹⁶ To his credit, Tyrus Miller does “claim that the biographical-contextualist impulse in criticism of *Nightwood* ... displac[es] problems of reading into problems of research, reducing the hermeneutic predicaments of the work to a problem of access to documents ... such an approach elides the rhetorical act that Barnes’s book as a whole, in its troubling lack of coherence and legibility, performed in its historical situation” (147).

¹⁷ The Dalkey Edition has the effect of making the novel almost unbearable to read, except for those scholars who are, in Bersani’s words, “obsessed with origins” (*Culture of Redemption* 159). See Miranda Seymour’s scathing review of this edition in the 1995 *New York Times Book Review*.

by “submit[ting it] to a criterion of transparency and disclosure,” thus eliminating “that opacity” necessary to make something politically and aesthetically appealing (309).

Monique Wittig perhaps first refused to identify an author’s sexuality by picking up on such details as the novel’s description of one of its major characters, Robin, as “a tall girl with the body of a boy,” a statement which itself prevents one set of sexual features from being attached to an individual body and endowing it with gender (46). As Wittig puts it in “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?”, Barnes “makes no difference in the way she describes male and female characters” (64). Rather than distribute sexually descriptive terms and gendered pronouns in a consistent manner, the novel recombines these terms, so that gendered language cannot be used to pin down the protagonist’s sexuality. We might ask whether Robin is a girl whose body resembles that of a boy, or whether the description of the body as a boy’s suggests that a boy has taken on the gender of a girl (46).¹⁸ In either case, Robin refuses to be classified as feminine or its disavowed sister, lesbian.¹⁹

So deliberately performative is the sexuality of most every one of *Nightwood*’s characters that it ceases to refer to anything outside and prior to performance. Felix Volkbein, Robin’s first suitor in the novel, is drawn to her because he believes her to be an “actor who ... withholds a vocabulary until the profitable moment when he shall be facing his audience—in her case a guarded extempore to the body” (38). The

¹⁸ Riviere’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929) is historically instructive here. By ceasing to “draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’ ” and suggesting that “whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing,” Riviere launched the first major argument that gender is pure performance (73).

¹⁹ Relying on Kristeva’s notion of “*écriture féminine*,” Henke identifies the novel and Robin with “feminine difference” in order to “interrogate ... gender and subjectivity,” but she takes both those categories for granted (336). Femininity presupposes masculinity and thus a heterosexually gendered dichotomy structures her reading of the novel.

“vocabulary” she “withholds” is one that would reveal her object choice and thus allow any other character to place her as a gendered subject (38). When we are first introduced to her she is wearing “thick-lacquered pumps” and looking high femme; by the time she is on to her third lover, the novel tells us that “Robin would walk in, with the aggressive slide to the foot common to tall people, slurred in its accent by the hipless smoothness of her gait—her hands in her pockets, the trench coat with the belt hanging, scowling and reluctant” (34, 69). In much the same way, Nora is depicted as “broad and tall [and] weather-beaten”—and O’Connor repeatedly enters the novel in drag. The constant move back and forth between femme and butch suggests that these characters’ bodies lend themselves to various performances.²⁰ Of this propensity, Wittig contends, “Djuna Barnes cancels out the genders by making them obsolete” (64).²¹ It is this kind of queerness in *Nightwood* that does to sexuality what *Light in August* does to race—namely, makes it irrelevant. This pulls the referential rug out from under gender, so that any reading of the novel in terms of familial roles is bound to be futile.

If critics of *Light in August* use racial codes to pass off the novel’s lack of kinship on Joe Christmas’s ambiguous racial identity, an identity that they believe must exist simply because the novel refuses to name it, then critics of *Nightwood* seize upon the sexual codes that the novel offers in order to discover the lesbian love story between two

²⁰ Robin’s lack of categorizability causes Philip Brian Harper to bemoan the fact that the novel’s “feminist content” is “suppressed” and thus to impute to the text a “feminist political unconscious” (89, 90). Harper claims that the novel’s “limbo of indistinction” is just what “all of Barnes’s characters struggle to escape. Thus distinction—difference—is of crucial importance in Barnes’s world” (83). As I see it, however, Barnes’s characters thrive on rather than try to escape from indistinction.

²¹ By assuming the normativity of heterosexuality, Wittig implicitly reproduces Freud’s claim that homosexuality is arrested development on the way to heterosexuality, either an inversion of it, or a regression from it. Veltman approaches what Wittig attempts by arguing that the novel “complicates our ability to ‘know it’ [gender], resisting attempts to essentialize it” (218).

of its major characters, Robin and Nora.²² I say “characters” rather than “protagonists” because a formal strategy of the novel is to have characters act much more like replications and relays of one another rather than as discrete human beings. Indeed, a novel that could be read as an expression of same-sex love between Nora and Robin renders individuality itself categorically ineffective because—as Barnes suggests of one authorial “I”—Nora and Robin are never separate selves, each of which can direct itself toward the other as object. They comprise a multiple body. In the words of the novel, “Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce” (65).

Wittig argues that reading *Nightwood* as an example of a lesbian romance does even worse violence to the text than whatever violence might have been done to the author as a child. In her terms, when Barnes is “[t]aken as a symbol or adopted by a political group, the text loses its polysemy, it becomes univocal” (65). While Wittig acknowledges the importance of “the lesbian minority” in reading Barnes as part of a tradition of lesbian writers, doing so, she argues, places the author within a system of literary-political evaluation that induces her text to speak for or against a particular group (66). Wittig finds nothing wrong with reading literature as politics, unless the goal is to celebrate an “accurate” representation of gays, lesbians, blacks, women, Jews, transvestites, and primitives—to name the categories of identity taken up by critics of *Nightwood*—or denigrated for bad representations of one or more of those categories.²³

²² Boone claims that “the novel’s representation of its underworld of aliens and outcasts organizes itself under the sign of same-sex love” (235). Marcus similarly suggests that “Barnes’s characters” represent “gays and outcasts” as well as “the black, the lesbian, transvestite, or Jew” (114, 86).

²³ See footnote 6 for examples of critics who do this. For a critique of the notion that there are “good” as opposed to “bad” images or representations of any such group—rather than simply body images—see Chow, “Where Have all the Natives Gone?” (29).

Either type of criticism, Wittig rightly claims, “prevents the text from carrying out the only political action that it could: introducing into the textual tissue of the times by way of literature that which it embodies” (65). The text can produce desire without specifying an object of that desire if it can embody something far larger than an individual subject and her sexual object. Only then can the text retain “its polysem[ic]” and thus broader power, which allows “the work of Barnes [to] better act for her and for us” (66). Left unspecified, sexual desire retains its literariness and defies the dominant order by being irreducible to its terms.²⁴

How can art be produced by a unified, identifiable subject, when both that subject—in this case, Djuna Barnes—and her art contradict such bio-graphesis? Indeed, Barnes’s choice of itinerant orphan characters suggests that she wanted to forestall categories of familial, racial, and national belonging. As the novel says of Jews, they “seem[...] to be everywhere [and] from nowhere” (7); as it says of the Irish-American, O’Connor, he has been “everywhere at the wrong time and has now become anonymous” (82). Indeed, all the novel’s characters are mixed up “out of a diversity of bloods, from the crux of a thousand impossible situations” (8-9). Writing about Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” Johnson argues that “[t]he ... status conferred by identity,” whether sexual, racial or national, “is precisely what Barthes is arguing against” (7). Instead, as Johnson points out, Barthes contends that when “writing makes you not know yourself ... something sexy is happening” (7). Losing herself, as an authorial presence, to the

²⁴ It should be added that Butler refuses to see literature as a special medium and sharply rebukes Wittig for saying that literary language is a form of politics, even though Butler herself argues that linguistic performativity can achieve political effects. See *Gender Trouble* (119-20).

anonymity of “a diversity of bloods” and “a thousand impossible” rather than rationally reducible “situations” is Barnes’s way of suiting multiplicity to the novel form.

The only good author, for Barthes, is a dead author, because only then can the reader enter the text without holding authority over and thereby gaining a sense of identity from it. Miller’s “missed encounter” with Barthes parallels the *Nightwood* industry’s missed encounter with Barnes. This encounter does not recover a lost gayness from the author’s childhood, but quite the opposite. In place of knowledge of a clear narrative with individuated characters and discernable family relations, the novel—to borrow the terms it uses to describe Nora—relies on a “gap ... through which the singular falls continually and forever” (51). That it does so places *Nightwood* in formal proximity to *Light in August*, which also presents, within narrative, something that is outside narrative.

Several Characters, Multiple Mind

In order to understand that identity was never there in *Nightwood*, we have to know something about where “there” is; put another way, we must positivize the unknowable “gap ... through which the singular falls continually and forever” (51) by suggesting what it produces. The most adamantly non-reductive critical approaches to *Nightwood*—notably Jane Marcus’s and Joseph Allen Boone’s—take a distinctly Bakhtinian approach in reading for the carnivalesque complexity that challenges norms such as the individual, family, sexuality, heredity and reproduction. But the radical challenge this novel poses to such readers is that in the world it depicts, there simply

aren't apparent rules to invert, or taboos to transgress.²⁵ Nora is a case in point, as the novel itself describes her as "one of those deviations by which man thinks to reconstruct himself" (53). To call Nora a "deviation" would seem to suggest some norm that any human being might re-assert as the basis on which to "reconstruct himself." But Barnes, I would argue, does not produce characters by inverting established norms. Nora's relationship to her social milieu differs from Bakhtinian inversion in three important respects.

First, it is impossible to say where Nora stands in relation to rules of any kind: "In court she would have been hanged, reproached or forgiven because no one would have been 'accused'" (53). In the space of the courtroom where rules are enshrined as law and punishments meted, Nora's behavior is uncodable. She warrants the conjunctive "or" that produces an arbitrary equivalence among death, reproach, or forgiveness: it's all the same when there's no normative subject to whom one might apply norms. Secondly, excluded from that social space and its rules, she can imagine changes in the rules, or at least behave as if such changes were possible: "The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem" (53). Nora is characterized, by means of a figurative difference in scale, as a Titan looking into a world that is too small to return her gaze. Since those who live in the world she observes cannot, in turn, know her, the novel is made of incompatible realities, each being no more or less real than the other: one where Nora is "outside" the little bottle that represents the world and another where the world

²⁵ Horner and Zlosnik make a similar point when they argue that the "tale of Robin Vote appears to be a tale of transgression; in telling it, however, Nightwood questions the very validity of terms such as 'transgression' and 'normality'" (87).

that includes Nora is outside of her, within the little bottle. Reciprocity and relationality between Nora and the world is consequently impossible.

Finally, the notion that she is “endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem” suggests that the novel uses her character to think about thought itself. She is absorbed and engaged in thinking, but there is neither source nor object of thought.

Thought-processing without a problem or solution characterizes O'Connor as well as Robin and Nora: such thinking connects them all. Robin exists “in a preoccupation that was its own predicament” (47). Instead of lacking a problem to think about, as in Nora's case, here, in Robin, thought itself is the predicament of thinking. Without an object, Nora cannot critique, compare, judge, represent, and differentiate herself from the “objects” of the world, much less among the elements of a world that requires those cognitive capabilities. In this way, her thinking resembles what Lyotard calls “drifting,” a thought-mode he favors over “the critical relation” to the world, which “still falls within the sphere of knowledge, of realization and thus of the assumption of power[.] Critique must be drifted out of. Better still: *Drifting is in itself the end of all critique*” (*Driftworks* 13). If the novel posits thought as distraction, absorption, and drifting rather than as attention, relation, conflict, and resolution, then it eliminates the psychological as well as the dialectical (or difference-based) aspects of thought characteristic of the modern individual.

Nora, we might say, is one of many ways in which the novel calls attention to its own anti-Cartesian mode of thought. By refusing to accept difference as the pre-condition for thought, the novel allows for the elaboration of a new, non-oppositional way of thinking about rules. Nora has no relation to the world itself and so remains

“outside and unidentified” (53); in this way, she is, as the novel says, “singular” (51). Robin, as O’Connor explains, replicates Nora’s version of impossible relationality in that “[s]he knows she is innocent because she can’t do anything in relation to anyone but herself” (146). Indeed, he tells Nora that “Robin was outside the ‘human type’” itself (146). Both characters’ singularity is thus a product of their ability to drift away from and reconnect with other versions of themselves—which is to say, other singularities.

As with Nora, the world that would contain Robin within itself—within the species-rules or boundaries that give it internal consistency by differentiating man from other species—is outside of Robin. Robin replicates Nora’s position of being outside rules and thus outside the world that makes them—in this case lacking the difference that individuates “the ‘human type’” (146). As a result, neither character can be placed in *opposition* to anything else, be it self to world, subject to object, or human to non-human, a way of thinking that strives for “an extreme point ... of nondifference or *dispersion*” (“Introduction to Schizoanalysis” 284). Rather than thinking of Robin and Nora as unique beings who observe the rules we might associate with reality, we should see them as dispersions of a drifting thought mode that disallows the traumatic element of difference required of individuated subjects.²⁶

Nightwood is organized by what I would call character replication and multiplication or, more precisely, the replication and multiplication of certain characteristics—since its “characters” do not “represent” individuals so much as present a thought-relaying and thought-processing machine. In his introduction to *Nightwood*, T.S.

²⁶ For a brilliant theory of how a radical sameness overcomes the separations and divisions necessary to create, sexualize, traumatize and individuate subjects, see Leo Bersani’s *Homos*.

Eliot makes this point in his own terms, when he claims “[t]he book is not simply a collection of individual portraits; the characters are all knotted together ... it is the whole pattern that they form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest” (xv). By understanding this novel as a pattern of humanity “knotted together” rather than made up of “individual portraits,” Eliot can claim “the figure of the doctor [O’Connor] ... came to take on a different and more profound importance when seen as a constituent of a whole pattern” (xiii). In calling O’Connor “a constituent of a whole pattern,” Eliot does not suggest that the eccentric doctor represents the constituent parts of that pattern, much less that he brings them together in some form of unity, but rather that O’Connor, unlike Barnes’s other characters, “come[s] to know them through their effect on each other, and by what they say to each other about the others” (xv). From this perspective, O’Connor becomes a component among similar components that operates as a relay connecting them. He not only connects Felix to Robin, Robin to Nora, and Nora to Robin and Jenny, but also embodies the principle that reveals these characters as a multiplicity, or extensions each of the other, rather than as a conventional cluster of individuals overseen by a narrator.

O’Connor shares the characteristic of non-identity with Nora and Robin—what he calls “an eternal incognito” (88)—and can therefore play with categories and conventions in much the same way they do. Moreover, he explicitly collapses the difference between body and mind, further complicating and multiplying the relays among thought and embodiment. We might characterize such activity as the production of an anonymous multiplicity of being—or simply the multiplication of becomings. O’Connor wears a “golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his

shoulders, and [fell] back against the pillow ...[.] He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted” (79). His purpose is not to display two sexes in one body, which presupposes a difference within the species that an individual can embody,²⁷ but to show that he can convey many bodies, thoughts, and personalities. In so doing, I want to suggest, he is not only performing those possibilities, but becoming them as well. In this way, “Doctor” O’Connor—who, as Jane Marcus implies,²⁸ may well have been Barnes’s parody of “Doctor” Freud—speaks and thinks on the order of what Deleuze calls a “schizoanaly[ti]c [being who] is unaware of persons, aggregates, and laws, and of images, structures, and symbols.... It is not representative, but solely machinic, and productive” (“Introduction to Schizoanalysis” 311). In his capacity to think in much the same way as a thought-processing machine, and in being “unaware of ... laws,” O’Connor is a replication of Nora and Robin. His job is not to represent the multiplicity but impossibly—in the world of the reader at least—to become it.

O’Connor is able to pick up on Nora’s suggestion about Robin that “the night does something to a person’s identity” (81) and use his own body and mind to take that suggestion many steps further. He claims that when a person “lay[s] himself down in the Great Bed ... his ‘identity’ is no longer his own, his ‘trust’ is not with him, and his ‘willingness’ is turned over and is of another permission. His distress is wild and

²⁷ Indeed, if gender could think, it would do so much like an individual mind does—first, by separating the species from itself by internally dividing it into male and female; then, by further separating itself from the “other” gender by directing its desire as a subject toward the opposite object; and finally by separating itself from its own body and part of its own mind by repressing, dominating, and acculturating the remainder of that sex it cannot be. Gender identity is thus a form of social power that organizes itself defensively both around everything that it cannot be (the “other” gender) and what it cannot desire (the “same” gender). Gender shares these basic disavowals and dependencies with the individual. Butler makes this point in “Melancholy Gender: Refused Identification.”

²⁸ See Marcus (102, 106-112). She shows that Barnes was a presumptive if not certain reader of Freud.

anonymous.” (81). This statement implies that our sense of control over body, mind, and speech, the sense so vital to sustaining the illusion of individuated consciousness, may in fact come from elsewhere—from a place of collective being which is not only out of “one’s” control, but indeed out of “one’s” mind. The modern individual whose self-control derives from a willful contract among identities gives way in O’Connor’s discourse to an extra-personal being that is neither inside nor outside the individual because individual thought is merely one actualization of this larger body of thought. Authority that comes from “the proprietor of an unknown land” (87) is what endows O’Connor with the ability to actualize multiple thought modes. Nora and Robin simultaneously exist inside a world that excludes them and outside a world that tries and fails to include them under its rules. O’Connor understands and exploits the potential implicit in the paradox of their existence.

When he claims that Robin lives in an “unknown land” within “a house without an address, in a street in no town, citizenized with people with no names [whose] very lack of identity makes them ourselves” (88), O’Connor arguably gives back to the multiplicity what the individual takes from it. On one hand, he recites the routine categories and coordinates that a modern individual needs to know in order to know him or herself—a house, street, and citizenry or contractual and willful social body.²⁹ Doing

²⁹ In *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, Philip Weinstein calls this sense of realism a “[t]extual alignment of subjects within these orientational axes [that] works to establish their identity and reveal it to the reader.” (96). He draws on Freud’s “The Uncanny” (1919) in order to suggest, correctly to my way of thinking, that within select modernist texts, “a subject’s movement through space becomes uncanny—for the protagonist, sometimes for the reader as well. The intentional ego’s spatial contract is rescinded; the subject is suddenly ‘on another scene’ ” (96). For my purposes, I would say that O’Connor challenges the autonomy of individualism by detailing “another scene” utterly foreign to the modern individual. That happens, Freud suggests, when the “ego [is] not ... sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons” (“The Uncanny” 42). Indeed, since Marcus has shown O’Connor to be a parody of Freud,

so allows him to remove the markers of identity that lends those coordinates their readability and exchangeability. This first move, with its many “without[s]” and “no[s],” and “unpeopled annihilation,” seems entirely based on negation (88). But this way of thinking without difference does not, *pace* the critics of post-structuralism, empty the world of meaning so much as reveal its potential fullness.

Let us say that in conventional novels, the individual serves as a placeholder for such categories as gender, family, nation, race, or some such identity. Each time a trait is “added” to an individual, the presumption is that this individual incorporates new material into his or her personal narrative and history and no one else’s. The individual achieves unique differences as it incorporates certain traits and abjects others. (As Judith Butler reminds us, becoming feminine entails rejecting certain distinctive signs of masculinity.³⁰) The individual, paradoxically, becomes at once an individual insofar as it identifies with generic types, including different genders, families, places, nations, and races: membership in the group comprising the identities of individual members thereof. Taking up this side of the argument, Émile Durkheim contends that “humankind[’s] ... mental being” is a “*conscience collective*” (xlii) shared by large groups within the species. On the other hand, as he also insists, “society can only exist by means of individual minds” making up that collective mind (xliii).³¹

it is worth noting that the former sustains what the latter denies: the ability to think in a schizoid manner. Whereas Freud, after walking through an Italian town, denies that the city itself—its “devious paths”—is thinking for and through him (“The Uncanny” 42), O’Connor relishes the sensation of an alien thought-mode “from another permission” taking over his mind and directing his body, as if he were an embodied automaton (81).

³⁰ See fn 29.

³¹ As both Wendy Brown and William Connolly have shown, liberal individualism’s twin concepts of identity and difference thrive on one another and form the building blocks of the modern American social body.

But if, as O'Connor suggests, there is no principal placeholder—no “individual minds,” then the categories that such minds would sustain—whether by dwelling within them or locating them outside themselves—are strictly virtual and not actual. Multiplicity reabsorbs all such rejected mental material into “ourselves”—the novel’s version not of actual but of potential identities (88), invalidating the difference between one person’s thought and another’s. O'Connor represents the essential multiplicity of thought in terms of the auditory image of being “torn into parts by a hundred voices” (92) and the visual image of “a thousand mice [that] go this way and that, now fast, now slow, some halting behind doors, some trying to find the stairs ... [some] on some couch, down on some floor, behind some cupboard” (93). In losing individuality, he becomes, within the space of a few pages, “a doctor and a collector and a talker of Latin ... [a] petropus ... and a physiognomist” (92);³² a “Sodomite” (93); a “*gourmet*” (94); an “angel on all fours” (95); “St. John Chrysostom ... a fart in a gale of wind, an humble violet under a cow pad” (96); and “the Lily of Killarney” (96), a musical film of the 1920s and 1930s. This is only a partial list of potential O'Connors. As so many possibilities proliferate, they cancel out any and all foundational oppositions and with them, the principle of opposition itself.

³² “[P]etropus” appears to be a misspelled version of pteropus, a type of bat. Like Robin, then, O'Connor includes within himself something “outside the human type.”

Ceci n'est pas une Nouvelle

O'Connor, I have suggested, is quite blunt about the formal challenge *Nightwood* poses to its characters and readers alike.³³ Explaining to Nora the utter futility of using reason to understand Robin, O'Connor cautions that his explanation will be as resistant to any cultural logic as Robin herself: "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it" (97). One can't understand Robin by making her a character in some familiar narrative. In this respect, Robin is to the novel what Barnes is to her critics—something that incites but utterly confounds interpretation. O'Connor is, in turn, the curious anti-narrator of the novel as a whole.³⁴ I make this claim on the grounds that not only do his monologues comprise a great deal of the diegesis itself, but also because his actions do not presuppose an individual agent so much as a relay-point between the minimally rational and the nearly illegible characters whom Barnes offers the reader. His thinking, like that of most every character in the novel, is fluid and rhizomatic. He tries to arrange into legible form words that seem to come from a theoretical place beyond normal cognitive ability. Readers who take seriously O'Connor's warning that we "will be put to it to find" a narrative in the novel will be better positioned to understand a narrative whose central paradox is that it is composed of experiences that do not cohere as thinking that unfolds from an individual source. Rather than call it an "anti-narrative," it is more accurate to say that *Nightwood* exposes the unnarratable multiplicity of experience.

³³ Philip Weinstein contends that in modernism, "knowing appears not so much unachievable as irrelevant" (198). There is certainly evidence that Barnes takes up gender as her primary epistemological material only to show that reading it in terms of gender results in severe critical reductions.

³⁴ Cf. Kannestine's suggestion that "the doctor becomes in effect and most indirectly the novel's narrator, telling the story ... in which he participates along with the others but which the others are not articulate enough to tell" (115-16).

My next chapter will explain how such anonymous multiplicity asserts itself in late modernist American literature as “population” and carries on a symbiotic relation with mass media. Here, I want to suggest that what “population” (another figure for multiplicity) and schizophrenic thinking share in common is the assumption that radically impersonal, un-individuated relations of force and cognition comprise any species. Rather than forming a socially identifiable subject, or, in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s words, an “individuality [that] presupposes sociability” among individuals (“Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity” 326), Barnes positions her characters in between points of exchange and so reveals the interchangeability of thought and embodiment. The relation among characters is not with each other as separate beings, but with an impersonal, aesthetically generated thought-processing machine that works and speaks through them and in a very real sense gives them what being they may be said to have as distinctive entities.

To make this machine, *Nightwood* overturns the relation between the reality of the modern individual and the potential for being it suppresses in order to achieve the illusion of unity and autonomy.³⁵ Barnes shifts the modern experience of reality from reading the world in terms of individual identities into an impossible—fundamentally poetic³⁶—

³⁵ In *Bodies, Masses, Power*, Warren Montag demonstrates how Spinoza’s radical refusal to separate thought from embodiment was based on “the motif of the *somnambuli* or sleepwalkers. The fact that ‘sleepwalkers often carry out actions during sleep that they would not dare to while awake’ ” suggests that the mind’s “ability to think is inseparable from the body’s power to act” (43). This ability “extends far beyond the acts of individuals: there is a somnambulism of social life” through which social bodies do not obey the commands of individual minds, but act at a collective level in connection, relation, and response to the inducements of other social bodies (47). Thus our social life and reality might well be the effect of processes unknown to us.

³⁶ Robin’s “street in no town” (88) allows me to suggest that the poetic qualities of *Nightwood* are on the order of e.e. cummings’s poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (1940). Simply by switching normal word order and parts of speech—as in: anyone lived in a pretty how town / (with up so floating many bells

experience where an anonymous collectivity thinks for and through everybody. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon describes this form of thinking as one that comes from outside “the individual’s personal psychic life” and flows among minds and through bodies rather than emanating from a single source (53). She sees this form of thinking as one that hangs on as a residual element in modern culture to be reactivated whenever rationality and realism fail to explain an unsettling situation.³⁷ O’Connor is curiously free of the constraints of an autonomous and self-contained individual body and mind. In the following passage, he offers a highly detailed and realistic account of himself as virtually anyone: “[he] was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor” or “was a high soprano ... deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as a king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner” (90-91). Just describing this capability for Nora multiplies being in a way that erases the distinction between one and several selves, but without creating anything approximating a unified self. To borrow from Tzvetan Todorov’s classic study of fantastic literature, “such a collapse of the limits between matter and mind was considered, especially in the nineteenth century, as the first characteristic of madness. Psychiatrists generally posited that the ‘normal man’

down) / ... / he sang his didn’t he danced his did”—cummings is able to create another order of reality whose inhabitants “dream their sleep” rather than dream in their sleep or dream about sleep. Just as for cummings, sleep is the effect and background of dream-processing, so for Barnes, reality is an epiphenomenon of *Nightwood*—something the novel dreams up as an after-effect of *its* reality.

³⁷ Gordon argues that “Freud might have called the primitive or the archaic the social”; such thought appears strange to the modern individual because it exceeds our ability to understand it (54). I would add that it was customary among such 19th and early 20th-century scientists of mind as Freud to assume that children resembled primitives. In a chapter of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* called “The Archaic Illusion,” Levi-Strauss does away with this notion once and for all, which is a vestige, as it were, of an earlier racist and evolutionary anthropology. He argues that, while “the child is not an adult,” we should not, “as so many psychologists and psychiatrists seem to have done ... insinuat[e] that the thinking of a civilized child resembles the thought of a primitive adult, or that the thinking of a normal child resembles that of an adult lunatic” (92).

possessed several contexts of reference and attached each fact to only one among them” (*The Fantastic* 115).

The novel, however, will not acknowledge that O’Connor is operating within a realistic framework that needs to be cleared away, implying a difference or disconnect between the world of conventional realism and the several worlds of O’Connor. Because he is strangely aware that the reader is subject to the same constraints as the individual, O’Connor is able to put his freedom from those constraints into legible terms. In describing the reality that Robin inhabits, he claims, for example, that “we ... who go to the opera, who listen to gossip of café friends, who walk along boulevards, or sew a quiet seam, cannot afford an inch of [Robin’s reality]; because ... it has no counter and no till” (87). Here he is acutely aware of a realistic reference-context and willing to share his knowledge of it with the reader. That O’Connor opposes our version of reality to Robin’s does not, I would argue, suggest that he thinks oppositionally. Deleuze might reformulate this difference as “the difference between two kinds of collections or populations: the large aggregates and the micromultiplicities” (“Introduction to Schizoanalysis” 280). The “real” world to which O’Connor refers and that we share is itself a collectivity, this implies. But as it is invested with the logic of exchange that produces difference, it tends “socially and psychically [to] repress the desire of persons” *as* persons. By contrast, O’Connor’s “multiplicities ... convey desire as a molecular phenomenon, that is, as partial objects and flows, as opposed to aggregates and persons,” or subjects of the dialectics of desire (280).

With the collapse of the distinction between body and mind, desire ceases to be grounded in a psychology of lack that cuts off the body's potential plentitude.³⁸ As a result, O'Connor thinks through and with the body. In the first major study of Barnes's oeuvre, *The Art of Djuna Barnes*, Louis Kannestine points out that "in *Nightwood* there are constant reminders of [the doctor's] corporeal reality" (111). As O'Connor himself puts it, everything he has come to know is "always learned of another person's body" (156). Indeed, when Nora challenges O'Connor not to "argue about sorrow ... too easily" (21), he retorts, "I, as a medical man, know in what pocket a man keeps his heart and soul, and in what jostle of the liver, kidneys and genitalia these pockets are pilfered. There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is Bedfellow to the lungs, lights, bones, guts, and gall" (22)! Sorrow cannot exist as a purely psychological phenomenon because of its somatic expression. Sorrow operates, in this novel, more according to humoral theory³⁹ than modern theories of psychology. His habit of thinking through the body also makes O'Connor what Deleuze calls a "body without organs" ("Introduction to Schizoanalysis" 281). Such a body lacks the architecture of "the familial aggregate" that fills in the body's endless potential with limits and permissible and impermissible territories of sensation (282). His body is partial, connective, expansive, and "exists at the limit, the end, not at the origin" associated with family and the taboos it seeks to establish (281).

Existing "at the limit" between competing realities, one that is reductive (ours) and one that is multiplicitous (*Nightwood's*), O'Connor converts aspects of both into

³⁸ In Leo Bersani's terms, O'Connor "refutes the reactionary Lacanian doctrine that instructs us to think of language as castration, as cutting us off from the revolutionary potential of the body" (*Homos* 179).

³⁹ Kannestine suggests "if, say, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is echoed somewhere in the novel, it is in the doctor's own words that it, along with the spirit that it represents, is parodied" (87).

something that can be relayed, if not exchanged or directly translated, with “us.” As he explains, “we who are full to the gorge with misery should look around, doubting everything seen, done, spoken, precisely because we have a word for it, and not its alchemy” (83). He grasps “our” world as one that reduces the old alchemy of the body into words that are easily consumed without palpably understanding what is involved in the transformation: “[yo]u beat the liver out of a goose to get a *paté*,” and “you pound the muscles of a man’s *cardia* to get a philosopher” (87). Here, O’Connor is saying that by turning the raw into the cooked, we will never understand the goose much less the throbbing of the heart muscle. The body will cease to be a way of thinking as it is for the animal and become a fanciful idea. Rather than make the novel into a mentally digestible object for the reader, Barnes uses O’Connor’s way of thinking to remind us of the carnival feast, in which, according to Bakhtin, “animal and human organs are interwoven into one grotesque whole” (*Rabelais and His World* 223). By doing so, she prevents us from separating the one from the other and turns both into something difficult to incorporate into our way of thinking. *Nightwood* is, in this respect, not a novel—or a sustained attempt at representation and knowledge—but a collectivity of radically heterogeneous and connected bodily and mental characteristics and parts.

To Think Like a Nut

In his role as a relay of connection among characters, we might say that O’Connor “translates” among levels of multiplicity wherever characters interact. But “translation” is something of a misnomer, inasmuch as one cannot “translate” something unrepresentable into something the reader can consume in terms of modern categories of

being. The novel disallows sensible much less rational conceptualization in such terms. O'Connor as well as Robin and Nora are merely names that Barnes gives to mind-states presenting pieces of actualized thought that ceaselessly, it would seem, break off and reform without stopping. As the novel presents this process—this time using Nora—“[h]er thoughts were in themselves a form of locomotion” (59-60), incapable of settling on a representation. As if to exemplify Deleuze's point that to maintain signs in flux rather than submit them to the codifications and transparencies of representation, O'Connor explains to Nora his uncanny ability to get inside Robin's thoughts:

To think of the acorn it is necessary to become the tree. And the tree of night is the hardest tree to mount, the dourest tree to scale, the most difficult of branch, the most febrile to the touch, and sweats a resin and drips a pitch against the palm that computation has not gambled. Gurus, who, I trust you know, are Indian teachers, expect you to contemplate the acorn ten years at a stretch, and if, in that time, you are no wiser about the nut, you are not very bright, and that may be the only certainty with which you will come away, which is a post-graduate melancholy. (83-84)

Where Nora weeps over her failure to name, classify, and thus know “[w]hat [it is] in [Robin] that is doing this” (86), O'Connor argues that to understand the value of a nut, one has to think like a tree, an accomplishment that requires not only enormous time and difficulty, thus the patience and guidance of a guru, but also forsaking the separateness that makes one an individual. In this respect, to think like a tree is literally “to become the tree” (83). But this is not the same kind of tree that Deleuze attacks as the model of Western genealogy and identity. O'Connor's tree is more like a rhizome, or what Deleuze calls “an antigenealogy,” which can produce so many parts as to be “detachable, connectible, reversible, [and] modifiable” (“Introduction: Rhizome” 21).

In paradoxically turning a tree from something rooted in identity into a narrative of endless connective possibilities, O'Connor implies that there is no guarantee that one will become "wiser about the nut." The "only certainty" is that there cannot be such certain knowledge. This is a very different way of experiencing truth than what we call knowing. We might say that O'Connor transfers the sensations he receives from the world (in this case, from the nut) without transforming them into a culturally codified "idea." In order to show how Robin thinks in rhizomatic continuity with her surroundings, however, O'Connor not only sidesteps the major classificatory divisions of nature (i.e., animal, vegetable, mineral) but also nullifies the difference between objectified nature and thinking as a specifically human activity. In approaching the nut (an object) from the perspective of the tree (another object), O'Connor renounces the human exceptionalism that would place him outside of nature in the position of observer-classifier.

Rather than coming to know the nut negatively, that is, by knowing that it is not the tree, and that his mind, moreover, is different from both, O'Connor unleashes the metonymic potential of signs. Indeed, the definitively human task of naming and thus knowing natural objects is overtaken here by the tree's own object-production. Such production can only be understood by doing what O'Connor does and reading the tree from the viewpoint of closely related objects such as "branch," "resin," and "pitch," and related actions such as "mount[ing]," "scal[ing]," "touch[ing]," "sweat[ing]," and "drip[ping]." A composite human-tree-body is the result. Being this kind of entity, O'Connor explains, Robin "can't put herself in another's place, she herself is the only position" (146), a position within and between.

In order to make logical sense of what it means to think like a nut, we might turn to D.W. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971), where the author proposes and performs his own version of such thinking. Winnicott shares with such 19th and early 20th century psychiatrists as Jean Piaget not only a theoretical and clinical concern over children and reality, but also a belief that madness is characterized by the collapse between mind and matter—with the result that the individual is united metonymically with its sources of both mental and physical reference. Once that child develops rationality, he or she still can synthetically reproduce such madness. To do so, he imagines himself as inhabiting the “infantile point of view,” where he

remained in a state of not-knowing, this state crystallizing into my formulation of the transitional phenomena. In the interim I played about with the concept of ‘mental representations’ and with the description of these in terms of objects and phenomena located in personal psychic reality, felt to be inside; also, I followed the effects of the operation of the mental mechanisms of projection and introjection. I realized, however, that *play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality.* (96)

Winnicott, like O'Connor, slips in between the reference-points that ground reality—between inside and outside and between one object and another, as well as between objects and partial objects. But unlike O'Connor, he does so safe in the knowledge that he cannot actually step outside the framework of instrumental reason and reflective judgment in order to make himself “not-know.” The very boundaries of his status as a thinking creature make it possible to play with those boundaries without risk of madness. In stark contrast to psychoanalysis, Barnes, as I drew on Lyotard to suggest, is saying that she can, using literature, revise the rules of her culture to write into existence a world that

might resemble madness but where ebullient irrationality, the antithesis of knowledge, is the form of truth.

In this respect, we can think of *Nightwood* as Barnes's aesthetic realization of Deleuze's challenge: not to present the world as knowable.⁴⁰ O'Connor operates as the minimally sensible framework capable of communicating what is fundamentally opposed to rationality and indeed representation itself—"her [Robin's] mind, where reason was inexact [due to a] lack of necessity" to use it (46). The novel describes "her mind" (46) in terms of an "inner room where Robin, unseen, [would] give back an echo of her unknown life" (57). Rather than think of such an "inner room" as a metaphor of the interiority of a mind, I would argue that this space does not establish a difference between inside and outside. True, in this "room" she may be cordoned off and thus "apart from the world" by a physical barrier (57). But as the novel puts it, "there entered with Robin a company unaware" (57). Whether she is unaware of the company or the company is unaware of her, they share the quality of being pieces of the "unknown," which suggests this room is not an actual but a virtual space in between world and consciousness. As such, it shares with Robin and her "company" (as well as O'Connor and the novel itself) the capability of creating potential entities.

Such a space, where there is not quite yet a clear difference between self and world, clearly resembles what Winnicott calls a "potential space" (107) in which "the separation of the not-me from the me" has not yet led to "the establishment of an autonomous self" (110). In a word, this is the child's playspace. As an unfixed area,

⁴⁰ By radically altering the terms of narrative knowledge itself, Barnes suits *Nightwood* to Deleuze's theory of a "minor literature." See *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (16-27).

the playspace exists, he contends, in “between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control” (100). It allows the child to exist in continuity with the objects to which it is attached. Such objects are not really objects so much as virtual extensions of the child’s body that allow that body to establish relays with pieces of itself. In such a playspace, whatever is unactivated, or “outside omnipotent control” by the child remains in a state of pure potential to become the child(’s) (100).

With this model in mind, we can see that O’Connor is Barnes’s means of enticing the reader into her playspace. To do so requires distancing oneself from Nora, whose attempt not to “be” but to understand Robin as a subject of desire presupposes a bridgeable difference between them. As if aware that Nora tries to establish difference as the basis of such understanding, Robin would begin “singing of a life that [Nora] herself had no part in; snatches of harmony as tell-tale as the possessions of a traveller from a foreign land” (57). For Nora to be part of Robin, one of her “snatches of harmony” and one of her “possessions,” Nora would have to enter the child’s world as Winnicott does, or become virtual identities as O’Connor does, and exist under the rules of the playspace. Such rules are not linguistic—both the child and Robin share linguistic unintelligibility, which the novels calls “an unknown tongue” (57)—but performative, as they determine how and whether we can interact with supposed “others.” In this case, interacting with “others” is to play with pieces of ourselves that constitute Robin. That Nora fails to observe such rules results in her ejection from Robin’s “room,” where there can be nothing but pieces of Robin. Inside the playspace—whether of Winnicott’s mind, the child’s playpen, Robin’s “room,” or the novel—the rules do not oppose self to other or

even bother to distinguish the two. Here, everything is an extension and expression of the child who is consequently not one but several children.

Indeed, “[s]peaking of children” (133), O’Connor tries to tell Nora that “‘Robin was beautiful.... sort of fluid blue under her skin, as if the hide of time had been stripped from her, and with it, all transactions with knowledge. A sort of first position in attention; a face that will age only under the blows of perpetual childhood’” (134). Put simply, Robin lives in the playspace—forever in potentiality. What she *is* can only be determined by the role she plays there, which in turn depends on the rules she puts into play. Such rules, as Nora recounts, entail Robin’s control over both “her toys, trains, and animals and cars ... and dolls and marbles and soldiers,” and Nora herself: “all the time [Robin] was watching me to see that no one called, that the bell did not ring, that I got no mail, nor anyone hallooing in the court ...[.] My life was hers (147). Robin “is” the rule of law within this playspace. In this way, Robin does not so much carry on relations with other beings in the world but extends herself into her surroundings, which are parts of her body and expressions of her thought. In reading her, *contra* Nora, the reader must become part of this micromultiplicity that is made up of the “fluid” correspondences between partial objects, is defined by its “skin,” free of “time,” and “beautiful” (134).

This reading of Robin implies a mode of being defined by synchrony and singularity rather than progression toward unity. In his essay “The Great Ephemeral Skin,” Lyotard describes this child-like process as one prior to the “instantiat[ion]” of “a person, a unity” (22), before “the unification of several singularities, of several libidinal intensities” into “the negat[ion]” that defines the subject by cutting it off from the object (22-23). This pre-unitary process might seem to fit with Winnicott’s notion that the child

exists in an intermediary reality between what will become itself, on the one hand, and what it is not, on the other. To Winnicott's way of thinking, the child cannot remain in this state of non-knowledge, thus hypothetically outside culture's mandate that to be a person one must be known, knowable, and knowing. The child consequently "becomes gradually decathected" from such an intermediary reality so that "cultural interests [can] develop" (*Playing and Reality* 14).

Lyotard draws on Freud's description of much the same principle at work in the episode known as "*fort/da*" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 14). Therein, Freud shows how the child's spool and string are both a fleshy and cognitive relay between it and the mother. But the difference between, on one side, Freud and Winnicott, and Lyotard on the other, is that to Lyotard's way of thinking, "[t]he bar" in between "*fort/da* ... becomes a frontier, not to be crossed on pain of confusion" between me and not me, here and there ("The Great Ephemeral Skin" 24). In my estimation, Lyotard is correct in suggesting that the very same heterogeneity characterizing the novel, its protagonist, and Winnicott's child is not only what psychology considers "primitive thought" but also "the boundary of a stage: over there the not-this, here the this. End of dissimulation, beginning of value" (24). Freud sees the reel game as a prelude "to the child's great cultural achievement ... instinctual renunciation" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 14), thus a means of guaranteeing and producing the transition from primitive to modern, as well as from composite forms of becoming to individuated forms of being.

In Lyotard's terms, "to go from the not-this to the this" is to change into "the manner of being what one is not" ("The Great Ephemeral Skin" 24). O'Connor's idea that Robin exists in a state of "perpetual childhood" that is free of "all transactions with

knowledge” suggests instead that nothing came before and nothing can succeed her present state of being. Indeed, Lyotard calls “narrative time” the end of the flux of multiplicity in favor of the unidirectional and stage-like progression of time, always into the future with an end, product, resolution or goal in mind (“The Great Ephemeral Skin” 24). This logic is more like that of sequential reproduction than of the wanton repetition characterizing multiplicity.⁴¹ Given that she is, in O’Connor’s words, the “first” and only “position,” Robin observes a pattern more like the synchronicity of repetition, where, paradoxically, nothing but herself has come before her and nothing but further repetitions will come after her. O’Connor describes this notion in suggesting to Nora that she “should have a thousand children and [that] Robin ... should have been all of them” (101). He also explains to Nora that trying to fit Robin (and the novel) into the developmental narrative logic of reproduction is to “have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known” (136) and thus to have tricked oneself into believing “the sweetest lie of all,” which, in Robin’s case, is that we can know who or what she is—even in terms of what she is not (137).

By poetic means—which, I have argued, needn’t observe the form of thinking an individual does—Barnes revises such rules of self-knowledge and acculturation for purposes of writing into existence a world that is strictly a novelistic creation. As a result, Barnes’s use of the novelistic medium would seem to realize Foucault’s notion that “[f]rom the idea that the self is not given to us ... there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as works of art” (“On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview

⁴¹ In this sense, Barnes’s project is akin to Lee Edelman’s, which, in *No Future*, entails radically questioning if not stopping the “continued functioning ... [of] reproductive futurism” (105).

of Work in Progress,” 237). Put another way, Barnes does not assume there is an individual who is “given to us” as the fundamental unit of culture and into which multiplicitous thought must be channeled, divided, and then unified by negating the several selves that one cannot contain within one self. Thus she thinks of culture—and perhaps even her life—less as the sublimation of primitive or collective thinking into art by and for the individual and more as a medium for replicating such thinking as an art form in its own right. In this way, the novel gives us a glimpse of thought and embodiment without the identifications and disavowals on which modern society depends to develop children into individuals.

Not Characters, But Composites

When Nora and Robin attempt to enter into communicative relationships with one another, they form a composite entity that, with each addition, increases in internal heterogeneity. Nor does the circuit of communication within the playspace distinguish between people and objects. Such are the rules of the game in the home of Jenny Petherbridge, who is Nora’s replacement as Robin’s lover.

Jenny understands objects as extensions of the human beings who manipulate them, extensions capable, in certain instances, of displaying a mind of their “own.” In her home, Jenny

left a trail of tiny elephants wherever she went; and she went hurriedly and gasping.... She tiptoed, nervous and *andante*. She stopped, fluttering and febrile, before every object in the house. She had no sense of humour or peace or rest, and her own quivering uncertainty made even the objects which she pointed out to the company, as, “My virgin from Palma,” or, “The left-hand glove of La Duse,” recede into a distance of uncertainty, so that it was almost impossible for the onlooker to see them at all. (72)

Rather than transform objects into things that she can use to carry on such social relations as serving tea, things enact characters' "machinic, and productive" capabilities ("Introduction to Schizoanalysis" 311). For Jenny, objects and their spacing, shape, placement, color, and relation to each other are inseparable from her thinking, as they are the elements out of which she makes and in terms of which she knows the world. Such objects constitute Jenny's sensations, and her sensations determine what they are and to some extent the rules by which they behave, even though she refuses to assert this power but abdicates it, as Nora does, to Robin. As the novel puts it, "Jenny ... did not understand anything Robin felt or did" and so lets her do whatever she will (168). My point is that these objects are not mere commodities for consumption, decoration, or the assertion of personal taste. To the contrary, they enter into a relationship of interchangeability and mutual dependence, both with characters and other things.

The notion that Jenny is characterized, "not [by] a separation [from] but a form of union" with objects, assumes, however, that we, as modern adults, do exist separate and apart from objects (*Playing and Reality* 98). But the major characters of *Nightwood* have no such relationship with objects. In this respect, the novel provides no conventional, external "reality"; the "reality" framing the novel is the same as Robin's playspace. We seem to glimpse an external world from inside each space she inhabits and controls: While Nora "bought [their] apartment" it was "Robin [who] had chosen it" (55). When inside, however, Robin "[l]ook[s] from the long windows [and sees] a fountain figure, a tall granite woman bending forward with lifted head; one hand was held over the pelvic round as if to warn a child who goes incautiously" (55). The outside is also Robin. The novel refuses to frame and contain the playspace, in much the same

way that Deleuze unframes the Wolf Man, asking us to understand reality in terms of what he sees outside the window (several wolves in a tree) rather than what Freud glimpses inside the child's world and must disavow in order to preserve his theory that the wolves, in Deleuze's words, are one "Oedipalized wolf or dog, the castrated-castrating daddy-wolf" ("One or Several Wolves?" 29).

If in the novel there are neither objects of thought nor objects of knowledge, but only drifting, dispersed, partial mind-states and body parts, then Jenny and her objects are what Deleuze would call "virtual [and] *partial*" in that both "lack... [their] own identity" ("Repetition for Itself" 100, 101). Such partiality of being is the medium of multiplicity. The incompleteness of Robin's being allows it mindlessly to seek out other part subjects and objects of which to form new singularities. In Jenny's case, the novel calls on Robin's playspace in order to provide, in its own words, "two halves of a movement that had, as in sculpture ... a movement" or potential animation, but remains potential: "the fundamental condition for completion was in neither of them" (69). If one is neither united with an object nor able to separate from it as a subject, then one is a composite form in which irregular and even incompatible features coalesce. Jenny is perhaps the perfect partner for Robin in this respect. She neither completes nor opposes Robin but is "a 'squatter' by instinct" (68) who can, as O'Connor suggests, "'appropriat[e] Robin's mind'" (124).

To be such a match, Jenny not only she speaks through "words ... that seem to have been leant to her" (66), but also uses a child that has been leant to her: "A little girl (Jenny called her niece, though she was no relation)" (70). There is no evidence as to where this "little girl" has come from or to whom she belongs. Felix Volkbein recounts

to O'Connor how Jenny came into his store and told him “‘a story about a little girl she had staying with her (she called her Sylvia) ... it appears that this little girl had ‘fallen in love’ with [Robin].’” (115). For this reason, he goes on, “[d]uring the holidays, when the child was way, [Jenny] became ‘anxious’—that is the way she put it—as to whether or not” “Robin would stay with her (115). The child forms a part of the body between Jenny, Robin, and the objects that surround them. Jenny admits as much—that she “‘us[es] a child for [her] own ends’”(115). Losing the child is much the same as losing an object or part of the body that Jenny forms with Robin.

In addition to toy objects, Nora and Robin surround themselves with such pieces of themselves as “circus chairs, wooden horses,” “venetian chandeliers,” “stage-drops,” “cherubim,” “ecclesiastical hangings,” “a spignet,” “and a miscellaneous collection of music boxes” (55-56), which are, according to the “rules” I have been elaborating, self actualizations or pieces of Nora and Robin themselves and the medium that connects them to one another. Indeed, “[i]n the passage of their lives together, every object in the garden, every item in the house, every word they spoke, attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humours” (61). It is by generating this tissue of desire that Barnes creates abundance rather than the lack that, in psychoanalytic terms, generates desire as the compulsion to fill the lack. Such excess might remind us of Lyotard’s notion of the “skin” containing “several singularities, of several libidinal intensities” that cannot be reduced to a desiring subject and its object (“The Great Ephemeral Skin” 22). According to the novel, this material emerges out of the “unknown” (57) and threatens to “form [...] a monster with two heads” (59).

Between Robin and Nora there is only the connective medium itself. They are part objects or part subjects, as the case may be, without such a medium. It is in this capacity that Nora suffers “from the personality of the house” (56). She is keenly “aware that her [own] soft and careful movements” amongst the objects “were the outcome of an unreasoning fear—if she disarranged anything Robin might become confused—might lose the scent of home” (56). Though tyrannized by objects within Robin’s domain of control over such objects, Nora never assumes the status of an individual alienated from or possessed by the objects surrounding her. They are her relation to Robin and are, then, Nora herself. The fact that Robin is in the objects they share induces Nora to seek Robin in “sounds,” “chimes,” “cream jars,” “perfume,” “hair,” and “electric curlers” (58), and Robin in turn to look for Nora in “the facades of buildings” and “the sculptured head that both she and Nora loved” (60). If Robin sees Nora in bits and pieces, then, as O’Connor claims, Nora “sees [Robin] everywhere” (61), in “every couple,” “every carriage and car,” “the lighted windows of houses,” “traces of Robin,” and “some gesture that might turn up in the movements made by Robin” (61).

Even when Robin leaves Nora, these connections remain, as if the relation has more vitality than the individuals it connects. Nora “searched for her in the ports,” and “in Marseilles, in Tangier, in Naples” (156), as well as in the people Robin may have slept with. Because Nora exists in relation to Robin, “losing” Robin doesn’t lessen but increases the number of part objects that constitute their composite being. As Nora explains to O’Connor, “[i]f only you could take my mind off” the notion that “Robin’s mind and mine ... go together” (139), then she might know what it’s like to have her

thoughts to herself. But no such independence is possible. As if to address both the connectedness and partiality between both Nora and Robin and Robin and Jenny, Nora confronts Jenny and finds that Robin had given her a doll just as “Robin had given [Nora] a doll” (141). The doll is testimony to the impossibility of negating the connection between part subjects. In a conversation with O’Connor, Nora contends that “[w]e give death to a child when we give it a doll—it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to another woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane (142). I would argue that the doll is not the life they cannot have but the only life they can have, which, in O’Connor’s response, is one of “the conjunction of the identical cleaved halves of sexless misgiving” (148).

Operating as a metonym rather than a metaphor, the doll not only is beyond the division that, Nora suggests, is necessary to reproduce life but also nullifies the difference between life and death itself. Explaining her negative reading of the doll, Nora recalls that

sometimes ... I would find her standing in the middle of the room in boy’s clothes, rocking from foot to foot, holding the doll she had given us—‘our ‘child’—high above her head, as if she would cast it down ...[.] She picked up the doll and hurled it onto the floor and put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it; and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor. (147-48)

In the doll, vitality and death are not opposed to but constitute one another. Shattering the form of such a combination is a ritual that secures survival in much the same way that

a ritual gift of sacrifice wards off the very death it enacts.⁴² In abusing and destroying the doll-child, Robin doesn't destroy her connection to Nora but intensifies it to a memorably murderous pitch. "Killing" the doll paradoxically brings it to life as the failure of Robin and Nora's relationship and, in this sense, makes the breach in that relationship immortal. This message is not lost on Nora, who, the novel tells us, "was informed that Robin had come from a world to which she would return. To keep her ... Nora knew now that there was no way but death" (58).

In the face of the novel's tendency to generate characters that tend to replicate one another rather than reproduce themselves in new and separate individuals, we might ask what happens when Robin has a baby. The prospects are not good for biological reproduction in this novel! Indeed, we find that repetition trumps reproduction shortly after Robin gives birth to Felix Volkbein's baby:

One night, Felix, having come in unheard found [Robin] standing in the centre of the floor holding the child high in her hand as if she were about to dash it down, but she brought it down gently. (48)

This scene in certain respects repeats the earlier scene where Robin destroys the doll. The reader feels the threat posed by the similarity of these scenes in view of the difference between the baby and the doll. Operating under the same rules that prompted her to destroy the doll, Robin understands the baby as nothing more than an extension of Felix and therefore no different from a doll. Nora, Robin, O'Connor and Jenny are only able to couple and re-couple, becoming, as O'Connor puts it, "identical cleaved halves"

⁴² For further explanation of how such rituals function, see Claude Lévi-Strauss's "Father Christmas Executed" as well as Giorgio Agamben's interpretation of that text, "In Playland: Reflections on History and Play."

(148). Felix and Robin replicate themselves in actors, dress, statues, architecture, furniture, and gestures, as well as a baby,⁴³ and biological reproduction consequently loses its privileged position as the socially sanctioned means of extending the couple. The child, named after Felix's father, is, as Guido the second, a repetition of a repetition. Insofar as Guido the first uses "life-sized portraits" to lay "claim to a father and mother" of aristocratic roots, he is himself the copy of "reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors" (9-10), imitations of individuals who were imitations to begin with. When Robin delivers the only strongly affective lines the novel gives her to speak— "Go to hell!" and "I didn't want him!" (48, 49)—we can't very well read this as a mother's rejection of her baby, but as a rejection of something already defined and overdetermined as an extension of Felix rather than herself.

In marked contrast to reproduction, replication observes a serial logic without beginning or end, past or future. The novel doesn't know what to do with the baby, I believe, because it comes from someone, requires a fixity and identity within a family, and must be invested with a narrative of futurity. Because neither the novel nor Robin can supply the basic requirements for its interpellation, the baby simply dwindles away. Robin may well be, as Felix tells O'Connor, "with me in Guido" (117), but by placing such features of Robin as "an undefinable disorder" (118) and "calamity ... in [Felix's] son" (119), the novel ensures the baby has no category to inhabit. The novel is, we must conclude, Robin's playspace.

⁴³ On watching Robin dress, Felix sees "yards enough to refashion" Robin and thus "make[...] a destiny for himself" (46). He dresses in clothes that are imitations of aristocratic dress and treats Robin like a living doll, dressing her to resemble an aristocratic body, parading her around European capitals and explaining to her the glories of the "old régime" (48).

One of the Pack

The scene of infanticide can be read as Barnes's version of Freud's "primal scene." In writing up his clinical history of the "Wolf Man" (1918), Freud observes that an adult will "fill in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth; he replaces occurrences in his own life with those of his ancestors," which include animals (256).⁴⁴ Freud sees it as his therapeutic responsibility to reduce the many wolves composing childish thought to the single figure of the father. Eating, coitus, bowel movements, digestion, fables, nursemaids, milkmaids, religious rituals, dogs, wolves, and sheep, are all "conditions governing the patient's object-choice," namely, a homosexual desire for the father (254). Deleuze contends that in every such psychological reduction, the "result is the same, since it is always a question of bringing back the unity or identity of the person or allegedly lost object" ("One or Several Wolves?" 28). Similarly, Barnes presents Robin as consciousness that never divided itself into self and others to begin with. Understanding full well that there is no clear line between adult and child, child and doll, man and dog, *Nightwood* extends the skin that stands in for the extension of humanity beyond the human species. It is in this spirit that O'Connor predicts, "Nora

⁴⁴ In *Darwin's Influence on Freud*, Lucille B. Ritvo shows that Freud assumes that forms of thought other than those of modern individuals establish "the bond of community between [man] and the animal kingdom," a "bond" shared by "children [and] primitive and primeaval man" (76). An "1887 article in *Harper's Bazaar*" is more specific, as Jennifer Mason points out: "Thomas Wentworth Higginson," an avid abolitionist, theologian, and writer, argues that 'A dog is ... a preparation or intermediate possession [of] that [which] precedes it; something that is more than a doll and less than a human child'" (*Civilized Creatures* 14). See fn 39.

will leave that girl someday; but though those two are buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will find them both” (106).

Wherever the novel challenges the difference between subject and object, it also erodes the distinction between human and animal as well. This is all done, I have suggested, in the service of forming a new, paradoxically non-unified identity that extends from human to animal—or is it the other way around? On moving to America with Jenny, Robin determines to seek out Nora, presumably one of her several dispersed parts, by “walk[ing] the open country ... speaking in a low voice to the animals. Those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing” (168). Acknowledging this relation—of indifference to both self and animal—Robin becomes the relation of human and animal:

Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out, and the dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting; his paws trembling under the trembling of his rump, his hackle standing; his mouth open, his tongue slung sideways over his sharp bright teeth; whining and waiting. And down she went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees. The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms, and wide and throbbing rose up on her fingers as she moved forward.

The dog, quivering in every muscle, sprang back, his tongue a stiff curving terror in his mouth; moved backward, back, as she came on, whimpering too, coming forward, her head turned completely sideways, grinning and whimpering. Backed into the farthest corner, the dog reared as if to avoid something that troubled him to such agony he seemed to be rising from the floor; then he stopped, clawing sideways at the wall, his forepaws lifting and sliding. Then head down, dragging her forelocks in the dust, she struck against his side. He let loose one howl of misery and bit at her, dashing about her, barking, and as he sprang on either side of her he always kept his head toward her, dashing his rump now this side, now that, of the wall.

Then she began to bark also, crawling after him—barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went padding. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat

crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees (169-70).⁴⁵

Even though this is the point where Barnes appears to put her protagonist at the greatest possible difference from “us,” this episode invites readers to look outside the novel—in the author’s biography—to imagine why Barnes would end with such a moment of apparent madness. When Barnes critics read this “sexually,” as her “friends [also] did,” this interpretive leap “gave Djuna much grief” (Herring 167-68).⁴⁶ The novel responds by dispersing the author, making it difficult, if not impossible, to gather her up within any category of identity. By calling into question even the distinction between man and animal, I would argue, the novel insists upon the notion of the subject whose story Freud is so intent on reducing to the Oedipal pattern in his account of the Wolf Man.

We can read Robin’s encounter with the dog on her way to finding Nora as a repetition of Robin’s vicious treatment of the doll if we simply substitute Nora’s dog for the doll or the baby. There’s absolutely no reason why a dog can’t serve as an intermediate play object in much the same way as a doll or baby, which would require Robin to strive to control the dog as an extension of herself. But the focus of this episode

⁴⁵ That the final chapter of *Nightwood* from which this passage is drawn is called “The Possessed” suggests that Robin and the dog are themselves taken over by the rules of the playspace elsewhere confined to the household saturated with human meaning. This is the same title as the English translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Possessed*, also translated as *Devils*. While Barnes’s novel is certainly not as replete with political meanings as is Dostoevsky’s, both share characters who are nihilistic, paranoid, outside sociality, and want “to lose [their] mind[s] as soon as possible” (*Devils* 7), “suddenly plunge[...] into mad dissipation ... wild recklessness ...[and] bestial behaviour” (*Devils* 41). Both novels also have several similar chapter titles and are replete with references to night, death, dueling and destruction.

⁴⁶ Herring notes that “[t]he scene had been suggested” to Barnes “by her friend Fitz, who once, when drunk, playfully pretended that her dog, Buffy, was her sweetheart. Her strange behavior made Buffy nervous” (168).

is as much if not more on a dog's response to Robin's animality than on her ability to make the dog an extension of herself and control it, as Freud's little boy does the spool that stands in for his mother. We can conclude only that the dog is not standing in for something else, something human. The dog is both an extension of Robin and not Robin at all—he is his own dog, one might say. The architecture of psychoanalysis crumbles—or rather flattens out here—eliminating the dimension of biographical allegory, eliminating, I would argue, interpretation *tout court*.

In a collection called “Reminiscences,” Barnes suggests as much. This collection was published together with biographical and scholarly essays on Barnes in 1991. Chester Page, a pianist and friend of Barnes's friends, remembers how “indignant” Miss Barnes would become “at misinterpretations of the final scene of *Nightwood*” (362). Page recalls her telling him that “‘The dog is *not* being romantic towards Robin! It is furious at the mystery of her drunkenness, a kind of exorcism of what it does not understand.’ It was taken, she told me, from the experience of a friend of hers, whose dog, ‘frenzied because of her being drunk, beat its legs against the walls of a room’” (362). I have argued that *Nightwood* both invites and resists reductive biographical interpretations. Whether this scene indeed came from Barnes's friend's experience or not is irrelevant, but what Barnes implies in her own disappointingly literal reading of this scene supports my own reading of *Nightwood*, first, because most critics refuse such literality, preferring instead to construct the author as a lesbian zoophile.⁴⁷ Perhaps more compelling, however, is the fact that the author gives us ample opportunity to cross over the sacred line between culture and nature and experience the perplexity, confusion, and

⁴⁷ Horner and Zlosnik claim that “Robin ... indulges in bestiality” (87).

disturbance on the part of a dog confronted with human animality, a form of experience that disperses the authorial function itself across species. In doing so, Barnes reverses the direction and priority of writing itself—shattering the illusion that it emerges from the life of the author by having it emanate from outside the authorial domain of human “representation.” The dog is the perfect expression of such multiplicity insofar as it lacks the individuation that sets individuated consciousness outside the body and the immediacy of experience. In becoming dog, Barnes performs a biographical reversal that suggests we can and should read for bio-graphesis, but not for the author’s life; the “bio” is that of animal life. From this perspective, the novel itself becomes its protagonist, or in its own words, a “beast turning human” (37). Coming from outside the human, it uses the animal to understand what it means to be human.

Barnes, who was also fond of writing about horses’ responses to human behavior,⁴⁸ is hardly the kind of author we look for in more conventional novels. To borrow from Deleuze, “it is the wolf itself, and the horse, and the child, that cease to be subjects to become events, in assemblages that are inseparable from ... a life. The street enters into composition with the horse ... and the beast and the full moon enter into composition with each other” (“1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal” 262).⁴⁹

Barnes replied to her friend, Emily Coleman’s query as to whether “you considered

⁴⁸ See Barnes’s short stories “No-Man’s-Mare,” “A Night in the Woods,” which details how a couple “had no relatives and no very close friends save their dog Pontz,” a “love for the dog entering in as part of them” (222), and “A Night Among the Horses,” in *Collected Stories*.

⁴⁹ See also Deleuze’s essay, “What Children Say,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. He takes up Freud’s “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year Old Boy” (1909) and shows that the boy’s fear of the horse can no more be reduced to the family trinity than can the wolf. He claims that for children, “I do not play the horse, any more than I imitate this or that horse, but I become a horse, by reaching a zone of proximity where I can no longer be distinguished from what I am becoming. Art also attains this celestial state that no longer retains anything of the personal or the rational. In its own way, art says what children say” (65).

yourself really Lesbian” by claiming that “I might be anything. If a horse loved me, I might be that” (*Djuna* 58-59).

CHAPTER 3

Class in the Age of Mass Mediation

In Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), the advice column and the letters written to it allow the protagonist to dispense advice to those who write to him in seeking answers to their affective and physical troubles. The media in which this exchange takes place is—within the novel—a mass-circulating newspaper, and it allows the letter writers to remain anonymous, thus to confess their deepest and, so it seems, most personal and individual problems in a completely impersonal medium. On this basis, we might call the relation between advice giver and letter writer a modern form of confession. Largely composed of such confessions, the novel is in turn conceptually grounded in the difference between the normative and individualizing effects of private confessional writing, on one hand, and mass mediated public displays of interiority and affect, on the other. The advice columnist's response to such confessions consequently qualifies as what Foucault calls one of many "procedures ... offered or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it" (*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 87). Foucault argues that since the 17th century, "Western man has become a confessing animal" (*History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, 59). By avowing one's desires to another, confession "guarantee[s] the status, identity, and value granted by one person to

another [as well as] signif[ies] someone's acknowledgment of his own actions and thoughts" (58). In giving one's private thoughts and desires over to another being, one becomes party to a process of redefinition—the gift of individuation by confession. And if one is lucky enough, such individuation will not brand one a deviant in the annals of "Krafft-Ebing" or "Havelock Ellis" (63).

Foucault's claim that such confessions have led to an endless archive of sexual truths differs from Nathanael West's notion of confession in one key respect. By the time West wrote and in his cultural moment, the confession-machine of modern culture had been churning out and disseminating individuating discourses for well over two centuries if not longer—in literature, medicine, population studies, statistics, the so-called science of sexuality—and West knew it. He knew it decades before Foucault made his paradigm-changing argument. The discourses of selfhood had proliferated to such a degree that they could be taken up by a novelist and turned back on the very procedures designed to secure sexual confession as the means of transforming a species into "confessing animal[s]" (59). A brief episode in the novel adds conceptual weight to my claim. On exiting a bar, the protagonist and a friend named "Gates" cross through "a little park" and enter "the comfort station," or public restroom, where they see "[a]n old man ... sitting on one of the toilets" with the "door of his booth ... propped open" (16). They drag him out of the toilet and into a bar (while making fun of his "elaborate" and "girl[ish]" manners), and there, Gates says to the old man:

"We're scientists. He's Havelock Ellis and I'm Krafft-Ebbing. When did you first discover homo-sexualistic tendencies in yourself?"

"What do you mean, sir? I ..."

"Yeh, I know, but how about your difference from other men?"

"How dare you ..." He gave a little scream of indignation.

“Now, now,” Miss Lonelyhearts said, “he didn’t mean to insult you. Scientists have terribly bad manners. . . . But you are a pervert, aren’t you?” (17)

Suffice it to say that Gates and Miss Lonelyhearts go on to let this poor old man know they are ““psychologists”” and ““get the bastard’s life story”” (17). In presenting in crude form the procedure of the modern sexual and psychological confession, West makes good on his promise to be shamelessly anti-psychological in his use of sexual confession. He made that promise in a commentary on *Miss Lonelyhearts*, called “Some Notes on Miss L” (1933), where he argues that “psychology has nothing to do with reality nor should it be used as motivation. The novelist is no longer a psychologist” (66). By mocking “psychology,” which “is [William James’s] not mine,” West advances the claim that “imagery is mine” (67). As if to clarify what he means here, his novel offers a parodic image of sexual confession as the butt of a rather raw joke. He knew that at a time when everything about the individual and his psychology had been exhausted by novelists, if not by psychologists and sexologists, his novels “only had time to explode” with laughter and violence (66). This mockery of a therapeutic scenario of confession turns the disciplinary procedures of the liberal state into a cliché so abusively ridiculous that it regains aesthetic power and freshness.

The protagonist, Miss Lonelyhearts, certainly uses the advice column to engage in the kind of private soul-making that Foucault has shown to be perhaps the major component of modern power. In the process, however, the novel radically reconfigures letters of personal confession from a genre that privatizes the individual to a mass medium that produces a series of sensations, images and intensities that escape the

individualizing effects of power. The result is a mass body whose parts are interchangeable with the mass mediated forms through which they circulate. The advice column converts the personal letter into a conduit of countless potential combinations of body feelings, body images, and body parts. As the novel allows a mass medium to reshape the way we imagine the body of the human species, it also suggests that individual bodies are mass mediated. *Miss Lonelyhearts* thus modifies the species-body by spelling the end to the image of one sentimental, confessional individual as the model of humanity and substitutes for him or her a series of similar and generic affects and body parts. Why else would the protagonist repeatedly and deliberately seek—in the face of troubled advice-seekers who come to him as letters of broken-hearted and disfigured bodies—to act as a “rock ... [that] neither language nor tears could affect” (55)? A “rock” is a figure of speech that can no less deny its dependence on speech than the protagonist can deny his dependence on mass mediated language—neither can be free of their material relays.

Miss Lonelyhearts nevertheless makes it his mission to stabilize a fluid species-body by arrogating to himself the status of “[t]he rock [which] was the solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, [and] his self-knowledge” (56). Here, West makes it clear that he has deliberately designed a protagonist who is an arch-enlightenment individual: sound mind rather than susceptible body, real rather than virtual, a self with the option of whether to oppose himself to or identify with others. The novel’s plot is centered on Miss Lonelyhearts’s denial of the second term in each of these sets, as he attempts to understand his complex relationship to the seemingly endless number of characters who seek his answers to their affective and physical problems. To

achieve such understanding, he differentiates his self-knowledge and the objectivity he brings to others from those who lack both. To turn such a private expression of affect as the confessional letter into a public and print-based melodrama serves to individuate not only the advice-giver, but also the advice seeker. His or her letters of confession, on becoming public and print-based, provide a sense of uniqueness that only a writer seems to possess.

To read the confessions of Miss Lonelyhearts's clients in terms of the traditional scene of confession spelled out by Foucault would be to take West's protagonist at his "rock"-solid word, but West's avowedly satiric and ironic language won't allow us to do that. Mass-reproduced newspaper language—as exemplified by the letters written to Miss Lonelyhearts—can neither be written as the confessional letter of an individual nor addressed, by way of the advice column, to a society made of such individuals and their affects. What the novel implies, in making fun of Miss Lonelyhearts, is that his mass audience is just that—a biological reality rather than the implied addressee of a letter. Put differently, I want to argue that this novel signals a major shift in the relations between language, mediation and embodiment. *Miss Lonelyhearts* changes such relations by suggesting that the epistle does not emanate from the consciousness of a modern individual nor from writing processes by which they individuate the mind-body relationship. On becoming mass-mediated, the letter acts as a life form in its own right, creating contact points between bodies so as to reveal they are parts of a much larger body with far more affects, extensions of life, and potentialities than can be contained or controlled by any one consciousness, body, or letter.

Mass Culture and Class

The novel is filled with epistles that signal—in the form of bad spelling and raw emotion—the poor education of their writers, which in class terms must be considered a deficiency in the letter writer. The advice columnist’s paper-peddling editor, aptly named Shrike, refuses to take to heart the pathetic appeals of those who write for Miss Lonelyhearts’s help. It is all too convenient to brand him the capitalist profiteering from their troubles.¹ We might also charge Shrike with ridiculing Miss Lonelyhearts’s sincerity in asking him “‘how was it that [he] first came to believe [he could save humanity]. Was it music in a church, or the death of a loved one, or, mayhap, some wise old priest? ... Ah, but how stupid of me,’ Shrike continued, ‘It was the letters, of course’” (44). Shrike is right in reading “the people” as nothing more—nor less—than the form in which they arrive at his paper for publication and profit: letters. To label the editor a bad boss because he refuses to receive these letters as the truth of a suffering social class would be to believe, like the protagonist, in the humanity of the letter writers and to identify with his claim to be “the rock” that grounds and stabilizes them all.

Because writing, circulation, mass reproducibility, affect, and bodies are major players in the novel, the sophisticated critiques of mass culture produced by the Frankfurt School would seem to be a natural place to go in considering what *Miss Lonelyhearts* does to those categories. Arguably the most appropriate text for this purpose, furthermore, is Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

¹ Shrike seems designed as a comic imitation of what Marx and Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1872), call the man of “naked self-interest” who cares only for “callous ‘cash payment’” (82).

(1944). As a matter of historical curiosity, they wrote the book while virtually exiled in Los Angeles, a city known for mass reproduction, simulation, and mass consumption, as well as providing the setting of West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939). But Horkheimer and Adorno's relationship to mass culture couldn't be more different from West's.

Although I pay no more than brief attention to the heterogeneous body of work produced by the Frankfurt School, I would like to venture one suggestion as to why that work takes the individual subject for granted, for that is also the reason I must turn instead to man-as-species or mass body.

In considering mass culture, Horkheimer and Adorno focus on the relation of the individual to nature.² Such an individual, they show, is a contradiction in that he both is and is not nature. As they tell the story of the Enlightenment, the individual is made up of nature and yet separates himself from nature—performing this operation both within his body and outside his body—in order to dominate nature. Nature nevertheless returns to haunt the individual as that which he is but cannot be, leading him violently to project his own nature in phobic terms onto the bodies of—here I use the authors' major examples—Jews and women. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to share Agamben's preoccupation³ with undoing this destructive separation. But the plot of their story depends on a dialectical machine that gets stuck in place: the death and

² In *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*, Steven Vogel argues that Horkheimer and Adorno “posit a static ‘nature’ independent of us” (96). Not only does Horkheimer and Adorno's prototype of the bourgeois individual dominate nature and in so doing become alienated from it, the prototype also “must renounce and suppress his own innermost desires ... and so is alienated at the same time from his own *inner* nature” (54). Horkheimer and Adorno, in other words, rely on a theoretical aporia whereby the individual must overcome nature in order to reconnect with an idealized “undifferentiated unity” (54). In the process, nature arguably becomes a lost ideal within each individual.

³ See chapter one, where I use Agamben's notion of “the anthropological machine” to explain this separation.

degeneration of the individual in the face of a technocratic culture (fatality), and the renewal and regeneration of the individual should he or she be able to escape that culture and reconnect with a lost nature (impossibility). To Horkheimer and Adorno, then, modern mass culture observes much the same relation to nature that the individual does. In an explicitly Freudian and, I would suggest, naturalist gesture,⁴ they suggest that mass culture contains within itself hidden recidivist connections to nature that enhance its automatic and mechanistic character.

Although mass culture's rationalized and mechanized processes are in many ways antagonistic to organic nature, they nonetheless draw on that same nature in order to lure the individual, through spectacle, seduction and the commodity, to submit to his own natural instincts. In the face of the allure of mass culture, the modern human individual loses his modernity, humanity, and individuality as he is "forced back to anthropologically more primitive stages ... [and] degenerat[es] ... [into] irresistible [forms of] regression" (35-36).⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno imply that nature is something to fear insofar as modern mass culture exploits human nature to turn the individual from a reflective being into a compulsive machine: "Everything, even the human individual, not to speak of the animal—is converted into the repeatable, replaceable process, into a mere example for the conceptual models of the system" (84). In being so converted, the individual becomes merely a component driving the mindless machine of mass culture

⁴ See Vogel (54, 63-64, 80) for an explanation of this stuck-ness. For a fine description of how this machine works in American naturalism, see Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (5-22).

⁵ Stacey Margolis explores American mass culture and consumerism's relation to addiction and similar "primitive" behaviors—whether addiction is figured as a defect in the individual's desire or as a force of its own arising from the substance itself—in *The Public Life of Privacy* (142-44).

and thus ceases to matter as an individual. In such a situation, they conclude, “[w]hoever dies is unimportant” (84).

Contrary to the ethical inflection of their argument, I view the radical insignificance of the individual relative to the species-body as a positive alternative to viewing nature as the unredeemable yet essential negativity in both individual and mass culture. Rather than see “nature” either as a lost component of every individual in need of being regained or as a force that hastens the decline associated with modernity, I would argue that the “nature” of the species-body, implicitly those elements of human beings that remain by definition outside and antagonistic to social life, operates and moves inside of social life itself.⁶ The species-body is a heterogeneous collectivity whose “nature” spreads well beyond the individual’s social relation to larger cultural formations as it marks both the expansion and extent of human social life *as* natural life.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, the notion that as “mere species beings [individuals are] exactly like one another through isolation in the forcibly united collectivity” (36) is a reality to be rejected. They cannot see mass cultural or mass mediated collectivity as anything but the devolution of an earlier notion of the organic individual into the “vast mass of the population” (38). They consequently imagine the individual as a compromise-formation between its connection to a primordial immediacy (“good” nature) and its subsequent aggression and domination over itself and others (“bad” nature disguised as mass culture⁷). In every “stage” of Enlightenment—which

⁶ See Fleissner (5-9), to whom I owe this insight.

⁷ The negativity of nature as mass culture in Horkheimer and Adorno’s work suggests a rejection or phobicization of femininity. For a fuller development of this concept, see chapter three of Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*.

they trace in literature from the “prehistoric” through the “mythic,” “epic” and “novel” forms—nature appears as both the possibility of individual and collective freedom and the perpetual, even fatal obstacle to freedom’s realization.⁸

Taking specific aim at newspapers, William Carlos Williams puts forth a similar view of modern mass culture in his essay on Nathanael West, “A New American Writer” (1931): “Since the newspapers are the principal corruptors of all that has value in language, it is with the use of this very journalistic ‘aspect’ and everyday speech that language must be regenerated” (48). Williams implies that newspaper language is a degenerate medium and assumes a purer prior era as the condition for West’s renewal of that language, which would serve as a warning against using the media to deceive the masses (49). In a “Symposium on Miss Lonelyhearts” (1933), Williams writes that “the newspapers make a business of deceiving” and the people who write to the advice column represent our “seriously injured civic life” (72). Early reviewers of Nathanael West’s fiction followed Williams’s lead in suggesting that his novels offered a shallow and superficial depiction of American society. In “Four Newer Novelists” (1933), William Troy claims that the defining feature of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is “the quite negative one of being without that proletarian self-consciousness that has become the keynote of recent American fiction” (672). Because “there is nowhere ... any effort to relate the vicissitudes of the characters to any particular economic system,” he continues, West’s “characters are [not] affected by the universal rumblings of the class struggle” (672).

⁸ Vogel summarizes their project thus: “[t]he original mimetic unity with nature that enlightenment destroyed for humanist reasons ends up after enlightenment’s victory ... restored—except not as any happy dialectical negation of the negation, but rather as a dark and ominous world in which human individuals ... have put in place the institutions and the technology ... that render individuality ... obsolete” (62).

Paradoxically, West draws this reviewer's attention to class by allowing it to remain conspicuously absent from his novels.⁹ As a result, "the creatures who inhabit [the fiction] have the shaggy contours of a James Thurber drawing," making the work "all very sad, bitter, and hopeless" (673). Troy equates depth of human character with the proletariat and implies that in modeling his characters after the drawings of a cartoonist, West withholds the category necessary to represent social struggle. "California Grotesque" (1939), Louis B. Salmon's review of *The Day of the Locust*, makes a similar claim that "there is abundant material here for ... careful social study" (79). But West, he concludes, "merely scratches the surface.... [and] by presenting only a two-dimensional picture [he] detracts from" a fuller characterization of American social life. (79). What they consider the superficiality of West's fiction induces these reviewers to believe that there must be some truth stirring beneath the facile literary surface that only a class-based analysis can recover.

The notion that West invites critique by virtue of class-based components that are either missing from his work or buried within and accessible to class interpretation continues both to inform and trouble later West critics, most all of whom are self-described Marxists. That they've turned an otherwise unsuccessful novelist into an academic sensation suggests these readers are still looking for something his early reviewers couldn't find: a novel that can be read as an allegory of class struggle.¹⁰ To

⁹ Indeed, one of the only pieces by West that explicitly thematizes class does in order to poke fun at it. In "Tibetan Night," the unpublished ms. of a short story, "the Bolshevik Regime" (3) has taken over North America. "Kaskaz, the principal city of Tibet" is one of the last outposts of "free" American refugees and "almost it alone, of the many cities of the world, knows not the dictatorship of the proletariat" (1). Courtesy John Hay Library, Brown University.

¹⁰ See *The German Ideology* for Marx and Engels' initial formulation of the layered concepts of "base" and "superstructure" (58). For the most influential attempt at negotiating among such layers, see Fredric

perform this kind of reading, critics situate *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* in the context of the debates over social class and American mass culture of the 1930s.¹¹ In *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning suggests that West's involvement with such leftist magazines as "*Contact*" (212), his relationship with Hollywood "studio radicals" (191) and "left wing critics" and "publishing houses," serve as evidence that the author was a "proletarian writer" deeply concerned with "the people" (226). To Denning's way of thinking, "the people" is a category that accounts for and indeed names the experience of the proletarian masses that labored in West's time. But "the people," as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contend, "is one," namely, a unity and identity—whether national, racial, or proletarian. (*Multitude* 99). In this way, "the people" "synthesizes and reduces" the heterogeneity of "[t]he population" to a single identity. "The multitude, by contrast, remains plural and multiple" (99). West, I would argue, is aligned more with Hardt and Negri's notion of "the multitude" than with Michael Denning's or George Lipsitz's notion of "the people."

An unpublished¹² short story called "The Adventurer" serves as a case-in-point that (arguably) West draws on the multitude for most all of his fiction. Of his propensity

Jameson's development and use of the notions of "mediation" and "transcoding" in *The Political Unconscious* (39-40).

¹¹ In addition to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, especially the essay on "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is representative of the importance of mass culture and media in thinking about its effects on both art and society. Relevant works by literary critics in the U.S. are Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*, the *Modernity and Mass Culture*, Fredric Jameson's "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Thomas Strychacz's *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism*, and Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*. For a useful index of American mass culture and communication studies, see "Appendix: 100 Titles for Further Reading" in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*.

¹² Much of the story is in fact reproduced in Jay Martin's biography of West. My fair use of citations are from the "Perelman Papers" collection, ms. 87, Box 6, Folder 17, pp. 1-24, courtesy John Hay Library, Brown University.

to haunt libraries and other places where information gathers,¹³ the protagonist, Joe Rucker, claims he has become

[o]ne of that twitching crowd that searches old medical journals for pornography and facts about strange diseases; or one of the furtive cartoonists without talent who exhume[s] jokes from old magazines and tr[ies] to resell them; or one of the employees of an insurance company gathering statistics on death; or a contest enterer working out some involved puzzle in order to win an automobile or ten thousand dollars. One of a shabby, busy, innumerable horde. (5-6)

The notion that West's hero can sift through a "card index" (9) for pieces of culture implies that culture is information accessible through indices. To gather statistical information about population is take measure of its multiplicity and, at the same time, to understand population as those very statistics and measures—which are multiple and additive in and of themselves. Joe is a consumer, not of discrete commodities, but of information pertaining to the population, which includes his own life and consequently makes that life one among many such bits of information. Mark Seltzer persuasively describes the process of reading individuals as a population as "the conversion of individuals into numbers," which, he contends, "correlates to [the development of] statistics" as a modern form of radically impersonal and un-individuating power (*Bodies and Machines* 100). In behaving like an information or statistical researcher Joe disappears into the "innumerable horde" of population itself and the virtual identities-in-anonymity it affords.

Such a horde is not the same as the masses, which, as Phillip Brian Harper suggests, divide one class from another in West's fiction. Harper argues that power

¹³ It isn't a stretch to imagine Joe as a textual version of West, who was famed while an undergraduate at Brown University for making a lending library out of his dormitory.

disciplines the masses either through individuation and education or sheer police force.¹⁴ His model of the masses implies that such class interpellation fails to convert the population into good culture consumers; masses that don't comply are "relegated to the extreme margins" of the orderliness of the liberal individual and his or her class (*Framing the Margins* 38). The result is a melee defined in negative relation to the dominant class, or what Harper calls the "community of rational beings" (38). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, to the contrary, distinguish "multitude" from "the crowd, the masses, and the mob" on the grounds that such figures, they argue, form "one indifferent aggregate" (*Multitude* 100). The many and various parts of the horde suggest it is internally differentiated and consequently heterogeneity is precisely "what [each of its parts] has in common" (100). Each of the experiences afforded to Joe in being "[o]ne of the innumerable horde" is singular, but in sharing such singularity, as he eventually does with everyone in "The Adventurer," he becomes what Hardt and Negri call "plural singularities" (99). Put simply, each type of person Joe can be—cartoonist, librarian, pornographer, statistician, and contest enterer—is itself multiple inasmuch as it allows him access to several parts of the population. In turn, each of those parts forms a repetitive series—of images, information, statistics, numbers, and calculable

¹⁴ To develop a more nuanced use of class, Harper uses Pierre Bourdieu to claim that "class status, in West's novels, is a function of the amount of educational and/or cultural capital achieved by a given character." He is interested in a type of social marginality that is not, strictly speaking, "a function of economic factors, which govern the category of class in the orthodox Marxist tradition" (199 fn7). Harper nevertheless falls back on a class idiom grounded in oppositional terms, arguing that "West's 'eccentric' characters must not be considered as an undifferentiated mass, but rather as one or the other of the two realms in a binary social structure" (33): Either you have cultural capital and are central, or don't have it and are marginal.

probabilities. In keeping with the spirit of multiplicity, West refuses to reduce the multiplicity of population to writing about and for any unified segment of humanity.¹⁵

While working in California with Depression-era Progressives, West wrote a letter that reads like a warning against writers and critics making just such reductive assumptions about his writing. Indeed, one can read this letter as an aesthetic treatise on the “character” of class. While the letter focuses on *The Day of the Locust*, West’s comments apply to *Miss Lonelyhearts* equally well, when he explains that

[i]f I put into [my writing] any of the sincere, honest people who work here and are making such a great, progressive fight, [my writing] wouldn’t be written satirically and the whole fabric of the peculiar half world which I attempted to create would be badly torn by them. I know that the answer to this would be to say that because the reality of honest, admirable, politically-conscious people would tear the book apart, that therefore the book is no good, but I don’t quite believe this. What actually would happen would be the mixing of two styles in such a manner that neither set of characters would be any good. (qtd. in Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* 336)

West uses satire as opposed to social realism, or what Denning calls “social modernism,” (122) to suggest that “sincere, honest people” are so many “styles” and “characters.” By doing so, he also implies that human types are so many functions of the stylistics of writing. The protagonist of *Miss Lonelyhearts* reads the letters of the people as if they were real beings, a practice that West mocks by having the newspaper editor, Shrike, represent the folly of so reading. People and their problems can be understood as every bit as generic as the forms in which both are represented by the mass media. The novel uses epistles to show that letters no longer imply authors outside the circuits of writing

¹⁵ West’s fiction is in this sense quite opposed to the aesthetic Denning celebrates in the explicitly proletarian-oriented work of Steinbeck (259-82).

production. Given the epiphenomenal death of the individual, it is foolish to respond with liberal sympathy to them. Through satire, then, *Miss Lonelyhearts* invites us to read for a multitude that can neither be broken down into individuals nor objectified as a class.

To explain what goes wrong in West's representation of class, Rita Barnard argues that his fiction gives "pictures, postcards, souvenirs ... films, pornography, and freak exhibits" an ontology and reality all their own (*The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance* 163). To make this argument, she draws on Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image" (162), which suspends the movement of dialectics, making it impossible to move beyond images toward a new cultural synthesis. At the same time, such images will not let us take refuge in a historically earlier model of cultural production. Images of objects have been detached from the objects themselves; images of bodies have been detached from people themselves. Such are the conditions of cultural production. Reality cannot be constructed, much less controlled by any individual; reality is always, by definition, mass-mediated and in circulation. Images of objects and people—rather than things and people themselves—are the primary medium of reality. Indeed, to think of utopian possibilities in such a context one must look to what Barnard calls the "revolutionary nihilism" (187) of the very images that displace human individuals and groups as the subjects of history.¹⁶ At the same time, lacking a class-based plan for the redemption of humanity, the "revolutionary nihilism" of images, Barnard implies, spells the end of class struggle, whether as the means of representing or as the means of producing historical change.

¹⁶ Even the psychoanalyst, Ernest Jones, got on board and claimed "[i]t is a fashionable fiction that Nathanael West is an important American writer" and he goes on to ridicule the idea "West's nihilism is ... profound" (370).

The critics I have sampled share a commitment to class as the category that organizes as well as disarticulates a social body in the fiction of Nathanael West. There is good reason for this. Both of the novels under consideration here feature a hierarchical individual-group dynamic that implies difference. Unruly bodies, crowds, collective human suffering, automatons, mass culture, mass production, and spectacle fill West's fiction, all indicating seismic shifts in the relation between the individual and his or her social class.¹⁷ In these respects, West's novels would seem readymade for Marxist readings were it not for two simple facts: Multitudes aren't made of mobs, and secondly, Marxist readings do not prepare us to deal with forms of production that have become superficial and immaterial because based on the "manipulation of symbols and information," including writing-production (*Empire* 292).

Such a refusal to acknowledge the historical facticity of a world without depth and to grant that world positive value as such is all the more striking in light of West's own rejection of an aesthetic of depth. The very images of mass collectivity that attract Marxists to his fiction defy class analysis, leaving those who attempt it no choice but to follow Jean Baudrillard's logic concerning American society: "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country," a place where "[a]ll [of America's] values

¹⁷ In *Patterns for America*, Susan Hegeman argues that West's "contribution to the discourse of the thirties is ... to trace out a moment of pure negativity" (148). Indeed, she reads West as a strong critic of mass culture, going so far as to claim that "West's association of mass culture with fascism points forward, to the end of the thirties, when cultural critics like the Frankfurt School refugees ... would make the connection between fascism and mass culture a familiar one" (153). Justus Nieland tries to buck this trend, arguing that West halts the normative ends of human community: identity, sympathy, and social bonds. To do so, Nieland claims, West replaces those ends with the means of their negation: spectacle, violence, and comic deadpan. Nieland stops short of saying that West's concept of the social body works along lines incompatible with those used by Marxists, preferring to read West as a theoretical description of "the immanent life of a thingified world" (76). By doing so, he implies an important difference between his position and, say, Lukács's, in that he celebrates rather than denigrates this world.

are exalted ... in miniature and comic-strip form” (“The Precession of Simulacra” 24). West’s novels are “bleak allegories of the great American amusement park, the world of capitalist pleasure” (Denning 256), and a “characteristically postmodern specter [of] the ‘museumification’ and ‘Disneyfication’ of world history and geography” (Barnard 182). When history, geography, and even real life are so many orders of simulation, the real is lost, along with deep logic as the only means to understand it.¹⁸ Critics who pursue this logic invariably grow ambivalent and even depressed about West’s work—and blame their depression on images without referents.¹⁹ In “The End of the Social,” Baudrillard argues that the result of trying to find depth in a society produced by modern media is to find no society at all:

[I]f the social is both destroyed by what produces it (the media, information) and reabsorbed by what it produces (the masses), if follows that its definition is empty, and that this term which serves as universal alibi for every discourse, no longer analyses anything, no longer designates anything. Not only is it superfluous and useless ... it conceals that it is only abstraction and residue, or even simply an effect of the social, a simulation and an illusion. (90)

To claim that the social is now “only abstraction and residue” is also to suggest that social reality haunts every representation. Baudrillard has, in other words, made reality into a sign of its own disappearance and activated that sign as the means of reminding us what used to be. West does not share this nostalgia for reality but celebrates the simulacra—for him, we might say, all reality is virtual reality.

¹⁸ In Fredric Jameson’s memorable analysis, the Westin Bonaventure hotel represents the end to deep structure as the means of understanding the productive basis of culture.

¹⁹ Jonathan Veitch, in *American Superrealism*, also claims that in West, “class differences [are] played out in an ... arena defined almost exclusively in terms of ... the Brave New World of mass culture and consumption” (134). Echoing Jameson’s frustration with pure surfaces, he writes that “[i]t is impossible to know how to interpret this world, much less act in it—or better, on it” (134).

In “Some Notes on Miss L,” West develops what he calls “the comic-strip technique” (66) as a way of demonstrating that the traditional foundation for imagining human beings no longer exists—if indeed it ever did. Human bodies are body images, as we see in this description of the character “Earle” from *The Day of the Locust*:

[Earle] had a two-dimensional face that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and a compass. His chin was perfectly round and his eyes, which were wide apart, were also round. His thin mouth ran at right angles to his straight, perpendicular nose. His reddish tan complexion was the same color from hairline to throat, as though washed in by an expert, and it completed his resemblance to a mechanical drawing. (109)

By performing this description “in space like a picture” (“Some Notes” 66), West produces a cartoon image. While this description comes from *The Day of the Locust*’s protagonist, Todd Hackett, and is arguably the result of classical training, thus a means of poking fun at a lesser-educated and indeed somewhat grotesque individual, the image suggests that Earle is a model for all “human” characters regardless of class. West strips humanity of the material differences that critics associate with class differences and replaces both with cartoons, perhaps the perfect example of how to place “humans” within a serialized system of objects whose “[p]roduction ... tends toward a virtual existence” (*Empire* 296).

From a Public of Letters to Mass Readership

The letters in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are important for understanding how the novel conjures up a public of letters and then reveals it to be a mass readership that ultimately proves to be something more on the order of Hardt and Negri’s multitude than Jürgen Habermas’s class-based notion of the masses. To do so, the novel changes writing that

allows individuals to exchange personal information with other individuals into print matter that refers only to other information. Hardt and Negri refer to this transformation as “becoming informationalized” (*Empire* 286). It “is characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, affect, and communication” (285). The newspaper business exploits all four players. Before we can understand how this process is crucial to the novel’s reversal of information over individual and consequently text over author, we must first understand what a public of letters is and why the novel seems to call up this traditional formation only to turn it into an “informationalized” readership.

In *Letters of the Republic*, Michael Warner shows that, at a certain point in history, when one sat down to read, one wasn’t reading alone, but partaking in a collective activity with a seemingly endless number of other readers. The paradox of this scene of reading is that a person is at once himself and a participant in something much greater than himself. Letters do not originate from individuals nor, oddly enough, are they written for other individuals, but make special reference to a public that exists in a semi-autonomous realm of cultural mediation. This “realm” is not the sum of a mass of individuals. When one writes with the public in mind, the result is a style and practice of enunciation that people recognize *as* public because it was “articulated in, and thus given meaning within, the symbolic practices of publication” (64). Put differently, by a curious tautology, publication produces a writing style that lets readers know how to write in a style designed for publication. Such publication cannot be one-to-one private communication, then, and so must be understood as entirely different from that form of letter writing.

By contrast, writers address Miss Lonelyhearts as if they are both communicating privately from one individual to another and taking on a public print identity. The fact that both the protagonist and his writers identify themselves pseudonymously suggests they mean both to conceal and reveal themselves in print. (Jay Martin, West's biographer, suggests that he flirted with assigning his protagonist a given name and surname only to keep his designation pseudonymous.) For this reason, Thomas Strychacz's claim could not be more accurate, in my opinion, when he declares, "Miss Lonelyhearts tries out for a role whose performance could only be thought anachronistic in the twentieth century: the man of letters" (162). Everything about "man" in West's world is made "of letters," or print identities, if not of images. And in Miss Lonelyhearts's world, letters don't come from individuals but constitute a mass readership, as they do Miss Lonelyhearts himself, as a differential system of abstract types.

On these grounds, we might suggest, as Foucault does, that the novel uses letters as the medium of "truthful confession [which is] inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power" (*History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, 58-59). That is, the protagonist and those who write to him seem to imagine a time before the rise and spread of American mass culture, when confessional speech was presumed to arise from thought housed within an individual body. Such is the spine of enlightenment ideology. In both conversational and print forms, speech served to individuate the body that gave rise to utterances. Conversation was one way²⁰ to produce a sense of a uniquely public self, but

²⁰ David Shields explains, in *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, that during the 18th century one's status as a man of letters depended on membership in clubs that disseminated the rhetorical skills necessary to

print took the individuation of the modern subject one step further by assigning each speaker the unique imprimatur of an author, an author who could authorize him or herself in print.²¹ Printed materials began to carry within them a rhetorical style and vocabulary that referred back to the writer, and so readers began to equate print with publicity. Print consequently acquired the power to determine how authors understood themselves as conversational participants in a public arena. Confession straddles the threshold between private and public because it can emerge from only one being and be exchanged with another equally private individual. When that addressee of the confession is by proxy a mass readership, however, the confession turns the private individual into a familiar public identity.

Miss Lonelyhearts's relation to letters is, in the novel's words, based on his attempt to find "some clue to a sincere answer" (1) to such a private question as whether or not to "have an abortion" (2). To reach its destination, however, letters of confession must be actualized in newspaper print. The novel shows how newspaper publication transforms the letter from a cipher of privacy meant for one pair of eyes into a melodrama for all to consume for pleasure. In becoming a popular genre, however, the letter doesn't

participate in the public sphere. To publicize oneself, one had to model writing after the polite forms of "[c]lubical conversation" (324) found in "coffeehouses, salons, fraternities," and related "clubs" (326). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, such clubs proliferated until, "by 1910, women's clubs might have eclipsed men's in numbers" as women became more and more prominent in the public sphere. Jane Cunningham Croly, one of the first women to write mass-syndicated advice columns under the pen name "Jennie June," also wrote the *History of the Women's Club Movement in America* (1898).

²¹ Benjamin Franklin is a principal example, according to Warner, of the relation of print to the man of letters. American culture imagined select members of society as persons capable of presenting themselves as disembodied personas. As textual performances, such individuals were subject to political and rhetorical determinations and critiques that applied only to their prosthetic public self. As Warner explains this process, mass print culture separated rhetoric and the image of the authorial voice from the embodied voice while paradoxically maintaining the illusion of conversation. But as I will argue, the novel turns the author back into text and puts the body back into the letter. See *Letters of the Republic* (73-96).

merely enter Warner's "symbolic practices of publication" (64). Were it to remain at that level, we would be dealing with confessional letters as the literary means of individuating written testimony, making it belong to one author alone even while being shared by other readers. Instead, I would argue, the incorporation of several print genres (letters among them) into the novel is based on a principle of repetition. The novel moves from one literary genre to the next and back again in a series of related episodes. West's biographer, Jay Martin, reads the novel as just such a "series of episodes" similar to "the serial form then widely used in [the] experimental poetry" of West's time as well as "the popular cartoon strip." (*The Art of His Life* 185).²² He concludes that West's "own imagination was sequential, and all his novels are based loosely on the same serial structure" (185). In this respect, letters cannot serve to create individuals but make them into one point of information along a network extending across various media.

The novel includes within itself—indeed is made up of—such serial media and those who produce it for purposes of "informationaliz[ing]" both (*Empire* 286). Being so constructed changes print from the means of individuating beings into making print and those who produce it into relays and repetitions of information itself. To understand how the novel is able to achieve this, we might borrow Hardt and Negri's suggestion that "we need to look more closely to see clearly the changes in our notion of the human and

²² In fact, Martin proves that W.H. Auden was a frequent commentator if not acquaintance of West. Auden's poem, "The Unknown Citizen" (1940), shares West's fascination with the notion that modern mass is mass man: The poem reads like a list of those qualities of one man that are shared by all such men according to "the Bureau of Statistics," which finds him to be someone who "bought a paper every day / And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.... researchers into Public Opinion are content / That he held the proper opinions for the time of year; / When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went. / He was married and added five children to the population, / Which our Eugenecist says was the right number for a parent of his / generation" (*Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* 464).

in humanity itself that emerge in the passage toward an informational economy” (*Empire* 289). To do so, they rely on several notions of what they call “*immaterial labor*,” the second of which “produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (290). Hardt and Negri argue that service-oriented labor shows how such information-management and distribution machines as computers have become central to most every form of production, especially those that provide services “based on the continual exchange of information and knowledges” (290). Miss Lonelyhearts shares this service-oriented function inasmuch as his advice acts as useless therapy through an exchange of information. It is certainly possible to imagine the newspaper in these terms, since “information and communication are the very commodities produced; the network itself is the site of both production and circulation” (298). Hardt and Negri demonstrate that information-production depends “not simply on a ... rapid feedback loop” between paper-production and the reader’s consumption of it “but an inversion of the relationship” between supply and demand (290). Put simply, a newspaper editor would never print something in the hopes that there would be a subsequent demand for it. He would make a “production decision ... after and in reaction to the market decision” and so ensure that there is an exuberant demand that he can supply (290).²³ The rapid, almost simultaneous response time between the production

²³ Gerald J. Baldasty argues that in the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century paper enterprise, the way to make money is to “offer news so diverse and varied that it would appeal to a vast number of readers” (105). Put simply, long before Hardt and Negri came up with the notion that in contemporary society demand precedes supply and indeed that the production of an actual object ought to wait until a virtual version of that object is placed on order, newspapers were testing out columns and sensational elements in order to stimulate market demand. Once assured that such material would be consumed *en masse*, they would print it. In this respect, newspapers existed in a tightly networked relationship with their readers, effectively anticipating and even creating desires before they arose within a group and then fulfilling them in print.

and consumption of information printed up in a newspaper ensures continuous feedback and market adaptability.

West takes up these qualities of newspaper production and makes them the formal engine of the novel. To show how to stimulate such demand and create active connections between the production and circulation of the newspaper and those who consume it, the editor, Shrike,

took a clipping from his wallet and slapped it on the bar.
 “ADDING MACHINE USED IN RITUAL OF WESTERN SECT ...
 Figures Will Be Used for Prayers for Condemned Slayer of Aged
Recluse.... DENVER, COLO., Feb. 2 (A. P.) Frank H. Rice, Supreme
 Pontiff of the Liberal Church of America has announced he will carry
 out his plan for a ‘goat and adding machine’ ritual for William Moya,
 condemned slayer, despite objection to his program by a Cardinal of
 the sect. ... Prayers for the condemned man’s soul will be offered on
 an adding machine. Numbers, [Rice] explained, constitute the only
 universal language. Moya killed Joseph Zemp, an aged recluse, in an
 argument over a small amount of money.” (7)

The adding machine and its numerical power are central. Exchanges of ideas, prayers, or wishes among individuals are insufficient to reproduce them as soulful beings. The transmission of information is the only exchange that takes place in a machine designed to calculate, increase, and distribute individuals as additive numerical information. As individuals become numerical elements, they also cease to be individuals. It should come as no surprise that the adding machine is the direct historical antecedent to modern computing devices, which, as Hardt and Negri show, is closely associated both with the information economy and the humans who form productive relays with such devices.²⁴

²⁴ William S. Burroughs (grandfather of the American novelist of the same name) invented the modern adding machine. He founded the “American Arithmometer Company in 1886,” which became the

The adding machine reverses the priority of human over machine by making the human a relay for its functional apparatus. One cannot do the work without the other, forming a mutual relation between human and machine. By giving themselves over to the very machine designed to do just that, they become integral parts of it. As the novel situates its characters within a system based on repetition, one that increases in intensity with each subsequent addition, the novel does not reproduce individuals, as novels were traditionally supposed to do. To the contrary, it demonstrates how “social life itself becomes a productive machine” (*Multitude* 148). The lives of prayer-givers are subsumed in the additive discourse of this machine and consequently become meaningless outside their places in a potentially endless series of prayer givers. The result is an economy in which humans are simply one set of informational objects among the many produced as the machine produces abstract social value.

Shrike’s adding machine serves as a model for the novel itself in that it unites text-production with an economy of information-spewing machines to preclude an authorial identity. Put simply, in much the same way that demand and virtual objects precede the supply and production of such objects, the adding machine suggests that the novel does not refer to “a referential being or substance” but “generat[es] ... models of a real without origin or reality” (“The Precession of Simulacra” 2). Critics are not off-base in thinking that West creates a novel similar to Disneyland, but they are wrong to denigrate him for doing so. The reasoning behind my assertion is simply this: Signifiers that can be repeated endlessly without referring to anything but related signifiers will

Burroughs Adding Machine Company in 1905. One of America’s first computer manufacturing companies, the Unysis Corporation, “was formed in 1986 from the merger of the Sperry Corporation and the Burroughs Corporation.”

necessarily generate a repetitive series of virtual worlds much like those accessible to the protagonist of “The Adventurer” in a card index or the Dewey Decimal Classification System: “From ancient Greece to nineteenth century Africa was just a quick thumbing through the card index, a scrawled request blank and a few minutes’ wait for my number to be flashed on the electric callboard” (9). Adventureland can exist seamlessly next to Fantasyland—free of contradiction. As Baudrillard puts it, the “sufficiently excessive number of gadgets used there [in Disneyland] specifically maintain the multitudinous affect” (24) that one is not an individual but forms connections with lines, automatons, reproductions of most every nation and epoch of the earth, and people-moving machines. There is no signified whose origin is in a real individual much less real world.

As if to exemplify this inversion of virtual over real, Shrike takes Miss Lonelyhearts through a list of alternative lives. This is the first:

“You are fed up with the city and its teeming millions. The ways and means of men, as getting and lending and spending, you lay waste your inner world, are too much with you.... So you buy a farm and walk behind your horse’s moist behind ...[and] turn up the rich black soil [...]” (33)

The reference to and deliberate incorporation of phrases from William Wordsworth’s “The World is Too Much With Us; Late and Soon” (1807), is West’s testimony to the absurdity of returning to nature and eschewing materialism in a society where nature is virtual and materialism, in Hardt and Negri’s words, “creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself” (*Multitude* 109). The world is indeed “too much with us” not as overwhelming referent but as a virtual entity whose parts and peoples can be produced and repeated within picture books, cartoon strips, on an adding machine, silver screen, in a card index, images, and a novel. Following close on the heels

of the Wordsworth reference, the reader encounters an allusion to West's first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), in which the eponymous hero "came upon the famous wooden horse of the Greeks" and "decided to find a way in" through the "Anus Mirabilis" (*Nathanael West: The Complete Works* 3). The allusion is especially important for when we consider what Balso finds as he makes his way through the entrails of the horse: a multiplicity of writings, books, journals, pamphlets, writers, poets, visitors, guides, artists, and fictional characters! The return to the soil is a fantasy that Miss Lonelyhearts might fulfill without setting foot outside the newspaper office; he need only crawl inside the labyrinthine path of culture that presents itself—deceptively—as the form of nature.

Shrike proposes a second actualization of the virtual:

"[N]ow consider the South Seas: You live in a thatch hut with the daughter of a king, a slim young maiden ...[.] Her breasts are golden speckled pears, her belly a melon, and her odor ... a jungle fern...[.] Your body is golden brown like hers ...[.] And so you dream away the days, fishing, hunting, dancing, swimming, kissing, and picking flowers to twine in your hair. ..." (33)

The image of a woman's body as a series of consumable food items turns her body parts into part objects. This image suggests that gender is not a category of being, but a composition of the relays between two beings and the sensuous palatability of luxurious food items they share. The idea that the "maiden" is the "daughter of a king" suggests that perhaps the ultimate expression of class—the sovereign, who by definition is "outside" class—is accessible to anyone as a fantasy. Even a monarch needs the media to publicize the imaginary plenitude of aristocratic life. We should not mistake the increasing silliness of such fantasies for what they actually do: Namely, prove that the

South Seas do not in fact refer to the South Seas but to something more like an “imitat[ion]” of “Gauguin” (33). Moreover, such writing creates a series of metonymic displacements of body parts for fruits and plants, suggesting that the body can be turned into and read as signifiers whose shape, size, and smell closely resemble flora within an ideal as much as “real” South Seas setting.

By a curious coincidence, Deleuze argues that such simulacra never involve “a question of ‘returning’ to the presignifying and presubjective semiotics of primitive peoples. We will always be failures at playing African or Indian, even Chinese, and no voyage to the South Seas, however arduous, will allow us access to cross the wall of the signifier” (“Year Zero: Faciality” 188). What need, then, for travel to a “real” place or to be a “real” monarch when both can be had in an imported food item, imagined in a woman’s body, painting, movie, or, as Shrike implies—visual description? He is a repetition of Miss Lonelyhearts—as he co-writes several of the advice columnist’s letters in the novel. Moreover, here he writes Miss Lonelyhearts’s life as a virtual existence that can be shared with any number of readers. By creating potential lives that are as good or better than the “real” thing, Shrike inverts the classical realist priority of actual over virtual. In this respect, Shrike performs rather like Doctor O’Connor in *Nightwood*. Both Shrike and O’Connor objectify within the worlds of the novel how that novel should be read.

Third on Shrike’s list is “‘Hedonism,’” which, as he explains to Miss Lonelyhearts, involves “‘dedicat[ing] your life to the pursuit of pleasure. No over-indulgence, mind you, but knowing that your body is a pleasure machine, you treat it carefully to get the most out of it’” (34). What follows is an extended sequence of all the

things the body-as-pleasure-machine might form connections with: “[g]olf,” “booze,” “Spanish dancers,” “fornicat[ion] under pictures by Matisse and Picasso,” “Renaissance glassware,” and “Proust,” to name but a few (34). In designating these as objects to be desired, the novel allows itself to be shaped by a force resembling Hardt and Negri’s third type of immaterial labor, “affective labor,” which has to do with “journalists and the media in general” (*Multitude* 108). The popular media have the power to shape our feelings as a group, a form of power that has increased exponentially during the modern period, so that today, in Hardt and Negri’s estimation, it exercises as much if not more force than sheer economic power. The print media, they explain, “not only report information but also must make the news attractive, exciting, desirable; the media must create affects and forms of life” (*Multitude* 108). We must remember that these existences are not only for the protagonist, but also designed as possible publications to be printed in a newspaper and widely disseminated among the population. Here, Shrike explains how the modern media form visceral connections among virtual subjects and objects. Making information into something real is as simple as using it to affect the senses.

Shrike’s fourth option, which is to “[b]e an artist or writer” (34), observes this same economic logic. What follows is a series of tips as to how Miss Lonelyhearts might use writing to excite and manage affect: “warm yourself ... [with] the flaming tints of Titian,” when “hungry, nourish yourself ... with Bach ... Brahms and ... Beethoven,” and so forth (34). The point is to become “the living art” (34), that is, to model life within and as a component of media rather than its source, or “author,” in the traditional sense. Under these circumstances, the sensorial affects of the mass body become an

extension of writing rather than the product of an author. Indeed, we might say, the novel operates as an information-intensifying and affect-generating machine, that in many ways resembles an adding machine. As a result, in Hardt and Negri's terms, "living and producing tend to be indistinguishable ...[and] life tends to become completely invested by acts of production" (*Multitude* 148).

Such a concept of cultural production abandons the notion of the reader as an individual who reads along with other individuals in favor of the concept of a mass readership capable of situating themselves within the multiple existences that unfold in a newspaper headline or in the gardening, arts, and travel sections. In all cases, it is the business of the media to connect readers with the virtual existences from which they take pleasure. Put simply, readers live with and through each other by means of the multiplicity of points in the texts that link them into an anonymous mass body. In producing a mass readership sensitive to the affective stimulation that only mass mediation offers, the novel is both an economic and aesthetic machine and so paradoxically includes and links up with similar networks and machines outside itself. As Roland Barthes explains the multiplicity of this intertextual mode of existence, "*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production.... the Text cannot stop* (for example on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across ... several works" of several types and the experiences each type affords to and produces within readers ("From Work to Text" 157). Living takes place at the intersection of texts. Which is to say, there is no "outside" to any given text, except in the text that has been designated as outside, or "real."

Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) offers the classic explanation of what went terribly wrong with modernity when it gave itself over to such abstract, mechanized, interconnected, and prolific processes. The story of the public sphere is the story of the decline of public conversation and print as a distinct sphere of cultural exchange, a decline in which "[c]ritical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity" (178).²⁵ Critical publicity," or the principle of exchange itself, enabled members of the middle class to use journals, letters, and novels to separate civil from both domestic life and authoritarian political society by representing, debating and, where necessary, challenging both in print. Indeed, civil society—made up of property-owning literate men and women of letters—is an epiphenomenon of critical publicity. In other words, the middle-class produces the very system of publicity that produces it as a class. Once that class established publicity as the system by means of which it could reflect on itself as a class, the same system could then turn authors into individual sources of print. Print publicity consequently became detached from the class that (initially) produced it by turning itself into an author-making machine.

As a result, those who shared this peculiar form of literacy—and, indeed, by the early 20th century had changed the very notion of class—were able to publicize and disseminate themselves on an ever-larger scale and in different formats.²⁶ As this class expanded to create a massive cultural apparatus that was both self-critical and critical of

²⁵ Richard Salmon shows that an export trend—which he calls “the American ‘colonization’ of Europe”—caused American-style celebrity-oriented publicity to overtake clubs and conversation-based public culture in the twentieth century (137).

²⁶ Marx made this argument as early as 1852 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he explains “the relation of the ‘political’ and the ‘literary’ representatives of a class to the class they represent” (26) as well as “the literary power of the middle class” (76).

the official state apparatuses as well as groups within society, it was able to challenge established authority and, by doing so, establish its own authority over most every aspect of public life. So long as literate individuals wrote in publicly reasonable ways, and so long as print culture appeared to emanate from the interior life of middle class individuals, there was—ideally, to Habermas’s way of thinking—no end to the expansion of civil society. It could in theory completely eclipse political institutions as the supervisors and caretakers of those elements of the population that were not in on the conversation comprising the public sphere. But end this liberal ideal of government apparently did, in the late modern era, when, in Habermas’s words, “[t]he original relationship of the domain of interiority to the public sphere in the world of letters ... reverse[s]” (172). The inner person who uses print to influence others gives way to a mass readership whose opinions, fantasies, affects, and even desires are already created, mediated, and circulated by print.

The novel’s mass readership, by contrast, is a mindless mass. To counter its rise and spread, the American journalist, Walter Lippmann—ironically himself a massively syndicated columnist—tried, in 1922, to reconstitute the mass readership as a critically thinking public. Doing so would require reversing what he called the newspapers’ “manufacture of consent” (*Public Opinion* 248). Echoing Habermas, he maintains that newspapers should be able to “hold a body of readers together” by encouraging them to take in “all shades of opinion [i]n order to differentiate themselves” one from another (332). Miss Lonelyhearts’s mass readership uncannily resembles the readership Lippman resents and would transform. But West understands that the multitude was not and will never be composed of individuals that can somehow be rescued and restored to

individuals capable of self-government. West obviously felt that the readership of his day had already become one fundamentally resistant to individuation. Like the Frankfurt School critics, Lippman considers such a readership to be a stupefied mass body that he consequently sets out to rescue by re-individuating it.²⁷ But like Hardt and Negri, West understands the revolutionary aesthetic and political potential of an internally differentiated multitude to think and behave in ways well beyond the limits of an individual.

Mediated Multitude

To this point, I have discussed the affective labor of the novel's information economy in terms of a series of virtual existences. Hardt and Negri argue for "actual" affect, which is "generally associated with human contact" (*Empire* 293). It is not opposed to but continuous with virtual affect in the sense that one group might know how to address another group "in person" because its members have read or been trained to do so by information already gathered and consumed about that population. "Actual" affective contact takes place when the protagonist, as in the following passage, leaves the newspaper office for what we might call the world outside with its "teeming millions" (*Miss Lonelyhearts* 33). Miss Lonelyhearts

fled to the street, but there chaos was multiple. Broken groups of people hurried past, forming neither stars nor squares. The lamp-posts were badly spaced and the flagging was of different sizes. Nor could he do anything with the harsh clanging sound of street cars and the raw shouts of hucksters. No repeated group of words would fit their rhythm and no scale could give them meaning. (11)

²⁷ For similar examples of the alarm over media's influence on the individual, see Catherine L. Covert (199-220).

I would like to call attention to the fact that something gets in between the protagonist and the “broken groups of people” in the urban environment outside the newspaper office. Unable to make contact with the things and people around him as discrete or whole things and people, Miss Lonelyhearts discovers a world that resists the categories the newspaper brings to bear on it. The “people” with whom Miss Lonelyhearts corresponds in and through the newspaper exists as distinct pieces of paper for which there is no referent or correlative outside the office. Inside the office, he can imagine an individual for each expression of personal feeling and respond in kind. Outside the office, individuals exist as both groups and part objects barely distinguishable from things, always in motion, and susceptible to absolutely no abstract pattern. His experience carrying on relationships in and through print leaves him without the cognitive equipment to sort out the modern city, much less to feel for the people he encounters there.

Human “sources” of information are just that: pieces of information for a newspaper man to render in the melodramatic terms that sell newspapers. The protagonist cannot read people any more truly or accurately than he can read letters. To borrow the words of one of West’s mid-century critics, William Bittner, instead of “presenting the ever-widening split between aspiration and actuality that keeps our public sentiments . . . from corresponding with the way things are,” West shows that no such split exists (“Catching Up With Nathanael West” 394). West shows, to the contrary, that there is no difference between “public sentiments” and “the way things are” because appearance is reality. In spite of his efforts to lift this “fog,” Walter Lippman had to

admit that mass circulation made the material world and the newspaper interchangeable. He considers this collapse of representation into the world represented an inversion of “the world outside and the pictures in our heads” (*Public Opinion* 4). The problem, as he sees it, is that few readers understand “how *indirectly* we know the environment in which we nevertheless live. We can see that the news of it comes to us now fast, now slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a *true picture*, we treat as if it were the *environment itself*” (4). The so-called public sphere does not have any special ability to reflect or to shape the real. It is one among many sensory-affective environments that we move through as if they were both out there and in our heads, which effectively negates the difference between the two.

To the degree that he resembles Habermas’s man of the public sphere, Miss Lonelyhearts is the butt of a pervasive joke. Rather than being middle-class by virtue of the domestic values he shares with his readers, Miss Lonelyhearts’s “job,” as he explains to a friend, “is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke.... but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are humble pleas ... that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering” (32). The protagonist is not the target of satire so much as a decent man living under the illusion that he can be free of illusion and in contact with the reality of human suffering. He believes that his decency has authority, efficacy, and can be therapeutically extended to those who suffer. Miss Lonelyhearts’s friends ridicule his idealism: “[t]he trouble with him, the trouble with all of us, is that we have no outer life, only an inner one ... [Miss Lonelyhearts] is an escapist. He wants to cultivate his interior garden. But you can’t escape, and where is he going to find a market for the fruits of his personality?” (15).

One might think that newspaper reporters would consider “outer life” more important and powerful than one’s interiority. (Mid-century American intellectuals suggested as much.²⁸) But Miss Lonelyhearts’s friends regard “all of us” as individuated and self-contained—and that, they say, is “the trouble.” Not content to leave it at that, the protagonist’s friends give this seeming contradiction another turn of the screw. They imply that interiority does not contradict an “outer life” because where it comes to “all of us”—which to my way of thinking is another way of saying “population”—inside and outside have no boundary. Put differently, these characters read their environments in terms of a “market” for circulating print (15). The market configures the consumer’s desire for its purpose: to align both with the flow of material goods in a mutually influential and profitable relation. At the same time, this transformation of consumer-market relations creates a common current of desire that courses through the population. As information flows within and between various individuals and groups, it generates more information in the form of feedback, which in turn creates more information for consumption. Foucault regards this information/affect generating machine as the

²⁸ David Reisman argues, in *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950), that only what he calls “inner-direction,” the function of which “is to teach the child something about the variety of adult roles he may enter upon and to permit him to ‘try on’ these roles in fantasy,” is a valuable approach to media (114). In taking over the tradition of storytelling peasantry at a mass level, print both relies on and produces a mass body that Reisman identifies with the term “population” (32). Mass media only runs afoul of the goals of directing the population towards an interior life when it does the opposite and directs the population towards identification with and a desire for recognition from without, that is, when media engages in what Reisman calls “other-direction” (120). Moreover, because many of the models of other-direction derive from “comic-strip and comic-book characterizations” (126), such segments of the population as children become, so Reisman laments, shallowly directed towards a condensed, image-conscious, and “instantly recognizable” (126) body types and traits that they are forced “to accept or aggressively to resist ... [as] picture[s] of themselves” (121). Writing, in short, is responsible both for making a society of individuals and then undoing that society by directing the individual outside himself, encouraging subsumption within the multitude and reducing lived experience into the brevity and technique of the images of the comic strip.

“intensity of circulations” among population and its products (*Security, Territory, Population* 15).

For Miss Lonelyhearts’s column to reach a mass market, he must produce information that can be consumed by as many different elements of the multitude as possible. Writing that enters into mass circulation obviously doesn’t spring from an “inner garden” that the protagonist “cultivate[s]” along with his readers. This would be to mistake “cultivation,” which is a class concept, for circulation, which has to do with reaching a population.²⁹ West’s revision of the scene of confession as the inducement of subjects within a mass market is crucial to the novel’s redefinition of humanity as a mass body in that markets, too, suggest openness, vendibility, exposure, exchange, transaction, mingling, meeting, and the negation of the difference between public and private.³⁰ Markets are multitudes. Markets aren’t made of individuals whose desires must be addressed but of statistically definable populations³¹ whose demands for more and new materials must, if possible, be predicted *a priori*. Precisely this understanding of the readership, I would argue, is responsible for Shrike’s optimism. If Miss Lonelyhearts would only “‘give [the readership] something new and hopeful’” (4), then, as Shrike puts it, the newspaper would create “‘newer and fresher paths’” (4).³²

²⁹ Bourdieu argues that cultivation is a class-specific concept that pertains to the “academic aristocracy” made up of men and women of letters (24), who distinguish themselves from the “mere cinema-going” masses who consume popular goods (27).

³⁰ The *OED* entry for “market” shows that the meanings of this term have proliferated to such a degree that it now covers everything from the virtual and informational as well as concrete and spatial.

³¹ On the notion of newspaper readers being definable as statistical units of population, see Wilbur Schramm and David M. White’s sociological study, “Age, Education, and Economic Status as Factors in Newspaper Reading” (1949).

³² See Roland Barthes’ *The Fashion System*. The newness of fashion, he explains, is a paradoxically “new” repetition of already-mediated material: “The variant[s]” within fashion—such as color, texture, fabric, rely on “multiplication [to the point of] indefinite repetition” (148). At the same time, the endless

Shrike writes a letter for publication in Miss Lonelyhearts's column that begins "*Art Is a Way Out*" (4) in hopes of encouraging the desire for aesthetic escapism in his readers. In contrast to the sentimental protagonist, a man of the public sphere, however, Shrike, the man of the market, does not see art as a way of life but as a way of creating a way out. As Deleuze puts it, "art is never an end in itself; it is only a tool for blazing life lines, in other words, all of those real becomings that are not produced only in art, and all of those active escapes that do not consist of fleeing into art, taking refuge in art, but instead sweep it away with them toward the realms of the asignifying, asubjective, and faceless" ("Year Zero: Faciality" 187). If the multitude is in fact nothing more nor less than a mass readership, there is nothing for art to do—nothing from which art can provide an escape. There is no "way out" of the mass market and by the same token, there is no "outside" to art: life itself is the affective labor of self-production.

The novel marks this change in the social body by showing how every element of the mass readership circulates between virtual and actual existences according to the dynamics of an autopoietic machine. To reveal the dynamics of this machine, West anticipates the same logic of reversal that Barthes exposes in "The Death of Author." To Barthes' way of thinking, as I explained in reference to Djuna Barnes, the illusion that even the print culture of a highly individuated stylistic variety actually issues from an individual author no longer holds up. Modern print culture makes it all too apparent that writing falls "outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol

repetition and multiplication is of a finite set of variants. To create something new, then, one has to rely, whether in the newspaper or fashion industry, on the repetition and multiplication of an already existing set. But that already-mediated set can be combined and ordered in almost infinitely "new" ways. Moreover, both the newspaper and the fashion industries produce virtual objects before they are actualized in fabric or paper.

itself” (142). As a result, “disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, [and] writing begins” (142). Writing no longer refers either back to an author or to a world but strictly from text to text, letter to letter, and image to image.

To dramatize much the same reversal of cause and effect, West devises a world based on likenesses rather than differences. This world comes into being as the letters published in Miss Lonelyhearts’s advice column generate list after list of pseudonyms referring at once to affective states and physical traits. “Broken-hearted,” “Sick-of-it-all,” “Desperate,” “Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (5), “bitterness,” “sour-grapes,” “a-broken-heart,” “the-devil-may-care” (12), and “*Broad Shoulders*” (43), to name a few. Each exists on a continuum where such states shade into others and can be replicated countless times over. Baudrillard suggests that a de-individuating process on this order undoes the difference between actual and virtual, immaterial and material. The list of pseudonyms, states, and traits all become “pure signifier[s], without a signified ...[which] mobilizes a complete imaginary collectivity” (“The System of Objects” 10).

The Face of Mass Humanity

Operating in such an environment, there is no need for a novel to deal with anything other than body images to provide psychosomatic forms of expression. I would certainly agree with Hardt and Negri that “affect” is the right term for relationships conducted in these terms. As they explain, “[u]nlike emotions, which are [largely] mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind” (*Multitude* 108). By identifying “affective labor” as a form of “biopolitical production ... that directly

produces relationships and forms of life” (*Multitude* 110), there is no more need to travel to the South Seas to experience the South Seas than it is necessary for mass media to use real bodies in order to for media to be made of body images. While it would be almost futile to try and date the moment before which such images did not exist and after which they entered into mass circulation, scholarship on photography, statistics, criminology, print culture, and related mass media strongly suggests that bodies ceased to be “real” in the traditional sense at some point during the late 19th-century.³³ The “realness” of bodies is that they are both actual and virtual images. Indeed, Michael Warner claims that over the course of the 20th century in America, mass media increasingly “offer[ed] ... an array of body images” that proliferated to the point that they created what he suggestively calls “a *mass* body” (“The Mass Public and the Mass Subject” 385, 392). West has in mind a mass body made up of the flows and sensations that one might use to describe the mass media themselves. The modern mass body, in this view, produces real life, embodiment, and affect as inseparable from mediation, image, and representation.

Deleuze shows how we link the feeling-states of affective labor with physical traits. To do so, he reads the face in positive terms, namely, as a series of signifiers that do not depend on what they are not—but simply are what they are. In the face, we read for “curiosity, spite, irony, ecstasy ...” (“Year Zero: Faciality” 169). The ellipsis is Deleuze’s, and he includes it as if to prove that an endless series of faces will follow. As he explains the perfect simplicity of this procedure, “[t]here is nothing to explain, nothing to interpret” (169), there are only signifiers and consequently no means by which to accentuate the positive by the negative. Put simply, he doesn’t oppose “curiosity” to

³³ See, for example, Alan Sekula; Mark Seltzer; Nancy Armstrong; and Jonathan Crary.

uninquisitiveness, “spite” to loving care, “irony” to obviousness, or “ecstasy” to agony. In producing this positive series, the face becomes two forms of face, the first of which condenses every body image into the image of a face, and the second adds to and so returns the favor. The face that speaks for the body becomes one among many types of body images and body parts. By contrast, when the novel offers the face of “a lady” (12) for Miss Lonelyhearts, he reads it in a manner opposite to Deleuze, namely, in terms of a principle of Saussurean negativity. He comes to see who she is by identifying what she is not: Her “smile ... was neither ‘wry,’ ‘ironical,’ nor ‘mysterious’” (12). Doing so suggests we come to know her by knowing she is not anyone else, which produces a sense of identity—if she is no one else she is only herself, or a unity. Here, the only body image we can formulate is based on what is not present. But West does not stop at that.

As if to exemplify such negativity, West provides us with a face that is literally missing something, which suggests that, like “the lady” above, we might know her by what she lacks. The following material, however, allows us at once to deal with both types of faces: those that act as a negative identity-making machine and those that deterritorialize into a positive series of body images and body parts. An especially memorable letter written by a girl of “*sixteen years*” (2) opens,

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts—

... I was born without a nose—although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she crys terrible when she looks at me.

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didnt do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being

*punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man.
Ought I commit suicide?*

*Sincerely yours,
Desperate (2-3)*

Let us begin with the feature that distinguishes this girl, namely, “*a big hole in the middle of [her] face.*” Whether this face is “normal” or “disfigured” is entirely beside the point. The hole is the lack we fill with significance. Put differently, the face is the established, normative site in which to see the individual subject. Behind or within the hole in this face a subject gazes back at us and asks for recognition. In the production of multiplicity into unity, the face acts as an impenetrable surface that “ceases to be coded by the body ... [and has instead been] *overcoded* by ... the Face,” the face of desperation itself (“Year Zero: Faciality” 170). Insofar as the face dominates and does the affective labor of both body and affect, the hole acts as a form of already-mediated information that “takes as its point of departure a homogeneous set of ready-made *signifying* messages” (179). On seeing a face, we already know how to respond.³⁴

For West, however, “*Desperate*” is not a unity but a singularity. This girl’s face is not an exception to but an example of the singularity of the mass body and its parts. West destroys the notion of affective subjectivity by rejecting the symbolic system that localizes subjects by virtue of lack—or what Deleuze aptly names “the black hole of subjectivity” (“Year Zero: Faciality” 168).³⁵ In theories of the individual subject, one

³⁴ We might remind ourselves of the cartoonish character Earle, whose body parts are overcoded with the facial traits of his eyes, nose, jaw, and chin, making what Deleuze calls “an *abstract machine of faciality*” (170).

³⁵ It is worth noting that Erving Goffman opened his popular sociological work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, with this very letter reprinted as his epigraph. As a social scientist, we might expect him to read the girl in deeply realistic ways. But he reads disfigured bodies in a figural way—in terms of “bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the

always achieves identity by virtue of his or her missing piece. Such is the bedrock of theories of alienation, where one is missing or has lost a piece of nature with which one must reconnect to be whole again. For Jacques Lacan, the missing piece that puts off unification indefinitely is what guarantees a subject has an ontology of its own. As Slavoj Žižek argues, the “*object petit a*,” or little bit of otherness within the subject, is “an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier” that guarantees a subject can use that object as the “void” of signification itself (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 95). As if in rebuttal of Lacan’s insistence that such a missing piece is foundational to the subject’s ability to signify, West literalizes that lack only to show that there is nothing—no words, no significance, no otherness, indeed no signifier—emerging from it.

West paradoxically uses the face “to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine, not by returning to” nature or some notion of lack, but by making the face merely a piece of so many body images and body parts that “*faciality traits* themselves finally elude the organization of the face ... on the way to the asignifying and asubjective” (“Year Zero: Faciality” 171). The face is not attached to any particular body but exists within a system of affective expressions that act as types: “[t]he face of a teacher and a student, father and son, worker and boss, cop and citizen ... concrete individualized faces are transformed on the basis of these units, these combination of units” (171). We refigure each face in a

signifier” (1). Though he does read “*Desperate*” as a sympathetic individual, Goffman’s implicit *coup de grâce* against a notion of unmediated humanity is to suggest that sensations, emotions, and images of embodiment are always, we might say, written in letters. As such, every body part exists in the medium of “signs” and “the signifier.”

metonymic lineup of parts. If we accept that each such face does not belong to any one body, then we cannot assume that the body must be contained and subjectified within a face. Both are simply parts of a much larger and fundamentally heterogeneous body.

In this spirit, I would argue that the crucial line in the letter—the line that “frees something ... that break[s] through the walls of significance, pour[s] out of the holes of subjectivity, fell[s] trees in favor of veritable rhizomes, and steer[s] the flows down lines of positive deterritorialization or creative flight” (“Year Zero: Faciality” 190)—draws us deliberately away from the girl’s face. She wonders if “*maybe I did something in the other world before I was born*” (3). There was no “I” before she was born, but there was and is “*the other world*” of virtual reality made of body images (3).³⁶ Deleuze considers the “I” of one face a form of containment when he suggests that, on being born and interpellated, “[y]ou don’t so much have a face as slide into one” (171). “*Desperate*” may have been slotted into such a category, but that fact alone does not individuate her. Rather, it shows how a multitude of body images transforms the presentation of a uniquely alienating anomaly into a representation of humanity itself. The girl’s face acts as the prototype of all such affective images and types. In this respect, it is the opposite of individuality, as it renders individuality irrelevant by intensifying and proliferating singular, partial, mutually incompatible, and overlapping types.

True, the letter of “*Desperate*” may lay claim to unifying facial affect and prototypical individuality. As a component of an advice column (and a novel) that circulates body images, however, the letter cannot deny the radical disconnection

³⁶ The literary enters the picture, as Barthes makes clear in “The Death of the Author,” with the end of the “I” and thus a unity.

between personal emotion and its mass-reproduction as mass affect. Consequently, the letter aligns three different domains of mass culture: newspaper print, affect as both a virtual and actual product circulating through print body images, which become life forms in their own right. The face of this apparently anomalous sixteen-year-girl, I am suggesting, does not individuate the mass body but multiplies it. Any component of that body might suddenly shift from one affective state to another and become “*Desperate*.” West creates what amounts to an inventory of the species-body. When such types, or “faces,” emerge from the networks and circulatory channels of mass-mediation, the multiplicity of connections that can be formed, detached, and reconnected between body images and parts within the multitude makes mediation through a category such as class irrelevant; no dialectical machine can generate and control the flow of images.

Rather than produce negative identities by means of the negative (or Sausurrean) logic I attributed to the protagonist some pages back, *Miss Lonelyhearts* rejects the bond of signifier and signified that produces an identity, whether individual or collective, racial, gendered, or class-based. Negation cedes the cultural field to the forms of indeterminacy, unpredictability, and open-endedness that allow us to see mass mediation as a life-generating aesthetic machine. In the face of this machine, the protagonist’s claim that “[e]very man can teach himself to use his senses” (26) is ridiculous, the media having long ago since taken over that function. Why else would Miss Lonelyhearts write such advice in a mass-circulating column if not to imply that one cannot in fact teach himself to use his senses but needs media to do so? In the novel, there is no raw “human” material prior to media to be culturally individuated by means of an aesthetic education. The lives of the mass readership are inseparable from the

biopolitical technologies of affective labor that produce life as a vital force pulsing through the readership and converting it into one pulsating mass. Modern life comes to be defined by the circular logic I have been tracing in this chapter, whereby mass media makes life dependent on the biotechnological mechanisms of affective labor. These return the favor by creating a mediated multiplicity of life-forms. These life forms, as the novel shows, include paper, letters, presses, typewriters, pencils, images, and adding machines. There are no direct, unmediated, organic, human bodies apart from the biopolitical production and mass mediation of body images.³⁷ As Hardt and Negri understand this definitive characteristic of modernity, the body can only ever be an image, a sensation, an affect—in other words, a form of vitalism. Such vitalism enters the network of mass-mediation as “self-validating, autopoietic—that is, systemic” forces (*Empire* 26), and the difference between life and death itself is negated in media and the novel’s regenerative aesthetic economy.

Drawing Life Lines

In this economy, the loss of one or several points along the lines connecting people is insignificant. Even though, as I’ve suggested, Shrike guides us as to how we should read the novel, and even though he seems to have the edge in this respect on Miss Lonelyhearts, he doesn’t speak for West or for the novel. This, despite the fact he seems to assume a position equivalent to O’Connor’s in *Nightwood*. Shrike, in contrast to O’Connor, thinks of the human community in purely quantitative terms. Shrike indicates

³⁷ Mark Seltzer, drawing on the representation of paper production in Henry James’s *The American*, describes late nineteenth century “machine culture” as “turning persons to paper” (*Bodies and Machines* 79) and, in James’s words, into “‘physical capital’,” “‘living property’,” and “‘commercial persons’” (qtd. in Seltzer 80).

that Miss Lonelyhearts should increase the readership by any means necessary. “Once,” as the narrator explains, Miss Lonelyhearts “had tried to get [himself] fired by recommending suicide in his column. All that Shrike had said was: ‘Remember please, that your job is to increase the circulation of the paper. Suicide, it is only reasonable to think, must defeat this purpose’” (18). Where the decrease of one point of affect within the mass readership would decrease its numerical quantity by only one, the sensationalism of suicide would certainly increase readership, by intensifying the feelings flowing through it. West knew this to be crucial to the American mass press: In “Some Notes on Violence” (1932), he writes, “[i]n America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination [as well as] a particularly hideous instrument” (50). A reader or writer should kill himself or someone else in spectacular fashion, because death did not kill circulation but increased it.³⁸

Suicide might indeed be viewed as the ultimate act of self-government. Murder might in turn be considered the ultimate expression of an individual’s power over another. The narrator converts such power into quantitative information in describing potential newspaper headlines: “Mother slays five with ax, slays seven, slays nine. ... Babe slams two, slams three. ...” (25). As mass mediated phenomena, however, suicide and murder are empty performances of individuality. Whether one offs oneself or someone else, the “victim” comes to life as never before as he or she is dispersed in print materials, headlines, and obituaries. The dead have a way of entering the very circuits and networks of media with the living. This principle holds true for the protagonist as

³⁸ In this way, West was fully in tune with the mass-mediated affective material of the culture when he thought of aesthetic success as “a little book with eight or ten murders in it” (“Some Notes on Violence” 51).

well as the supplicants seeking his advice. When it pitches *Miss Lonelyhearts* into a violent tussle with a grotesque cripple whose “gun ... exploded (58), the novel makes good on its Barthesian promise to kill the author in order that he may come to life as information. Miss Lonelyhearts becomes one more piece of information as he is splayed across the headlines of the morning newspaper, proving that writing is in no sense a personal act. In Deleuze’s terms, “[t]here’s a profound link between signs, events, life and vitalism: the power of nonorganic life that can be found in a line that’s drawn, a line of writing, a line of music. It’s organisms that die, not life.” (*Negotiations* 143). That newspaper images free the body from biology is, I would argue, the only—but utterly serious—moral of West’s story.

According to Deleuze, “[w]hat counts in the image is not its meager content, but the energy—mad and ready to explode—that it has harnessed, which is why images never last very long. The images merge with the detonation, combustion, dissipation of their condensed energy” (“The Exhausted” 160-61). It can be no accident that West designs an author-protagonist who depends on body images, images whose energy builds until it explodes within that author’s body. As a result, both *Miss Lonelyhearts* the novel and Miss Lonelyhearts the protagonist converge in the event known as the death of the author. West evidently had such a self-terminating model of the author in mind during the year he was writing *Miss Lonelyhearts*. As Associate Editor of the bitingly critical magazine *Americana*, he contributed to an opening manifesto which claimed that “[w]e are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present (*Americana I*. November, 1932). Is it any wonder that in writing *Miss*

Lonelyhearts he decided to use writing as a blunt instrument to murder authors and letter writers in order to transform them into media sensations?³⁹

Going Native

I began this chapter by examining the Frankfurt School critics' notion that mass culture turns man against both his own and external nature. This dialectical struggle is a form of class struggle inasmuch as separation from nature results in its exploitation and the domination over those classified as "natural" as opposed to "cultural" beings. Marx himself argued against such difference in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, where he claims that the "externalization of consciousness" that consequently "alienates [consciousness] itself" from the body is much the same as "establishing" nature as "thinghood" (156). Doing both prevents us from experiencing our existence as "*species being[s]*" (155). West's protagonist undergoes this same effort to overcome the division of his consciousness from embodied life (which is, in his case, almost entirely absent in the novel) and the bodies of his readers (which are perpetual virtual presences): "Miss Lonelyhearts became physically sick" (30) and takes a leave from the newspaper to contemplate "Man against Nature ... the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed" (31). I suggested earlier that Miss Lonelyhearts lacks the cognitive capability to make sense of bodies as flows of information that constitute

³⁹ West describes his own aesthetic program in much the same way: "instead of going forward in time," *Miss Lonelyhearts*, he suggests, is formed "in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald" so as to do the affective labor that media does in shocking the population who depends on it as an energetic lifeline ("Some Notes on Miss L" 66).

the world outside the newspaper office. Here, West pits his protagonist against a world that refuses to observe his (enlightenment) categories. This confrontation generates the distinctive form of disorder that results when things and people are simply too heterogeneous for any one class, much less individual, to order.

As a modern individual who views himself as a man on a mission to transform the multitude into a public, the protagonist erroneously assumes a foundational difference between the two. His mind must be perpetually at work converting sensory information into discrete bodies. Otherwise the illusion of self-authorship, the illusion that identifies him as a man of letters, will fade and die. He consequently treats his “own” body as a pesky reminder of his negative self-definition, or what he cannot be and remain an individual: “if his body got well everything would be well,” which is to say, he could get back to being all mind (36). To cure his illness, his lover, Betty, takes him out of the city and into the country, where he can experience “the curative power of animals”; there she encourages him “to look at buffalo,” “greet the trees and grass with delight,” see “red squirrels and a partridge” (36), “watch[...] a heron hunt frogs ... [witness] two deer and a fawn,” “a screech owl,” “a loon,” and listen to “[t]he crickets” (37). The idea, obviously misbegotten from its creation, is that nature, being outside and fundamentally opposed to city life, provides the appropriate cure for the individual who has defined himself in opposition to nature. By bringing Miss Lonelyhearts face to face with a nature that he locates outside himself, Betty condemns him to re-enact the logic of disavowal that generated the literary construct of the modern individual from the enlightenment through Anglo-modernism.

In order to be a unified and autonomous consciousness, Miss Lonelyhearts must deny dependence on his own body. The same logic repeats itself on a collective level as well. In order to perform the role of a sympathetic respondent, he must objectify the multitude as something outside and other than himself, something that emerges in a host of generic types—e.g., “*Desperate*”—in print. As he converts the mass readership into such abstract social types, he half knows he is repudiating humanity itself, the biological beings with whom he strives to connect one letter at a time. It’s a matter of him or them. To imagine his “self” within the human species is simply impossible and would destroy the print-illusion of the author as an autonomous bubble of consciousness. As Wendy Brown explains this phenomenon, “the ‘autonomous subject’ depends on the subjection of the ‘dependent’ ones for emotional and physical sustenance” (*States of Injury* 158). Miss Lonelyhearts admits that “[h]e read” a particularly painful letter “for the same reason an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain” (39). In moving from episode to episode in states of misery approximating those of his readers, he makes their misery into the prop of his sympathetic consciousness and the substitute for his biological oneness with all those “others.”

Whereas Miss Lonelyhearts the character uses print to create a difference that assumes a hierarchical distance between himself and his readers, *Miss Lonelyhearts* the novel shows that it is delusional to understand human aggregation and relations in this way. In Foucault’s terms, if we did so, we would be “forced to return to the old conceptions of ideology, and to say that the aspirations of a group, a class, and so forth, are translated, reflected, and expressed in something like a religious belief” (*Security, Territory, Population* 215-16). In this respect, class is no different than race and gender,

both of which portray biological life, including animals, as the property of individuals—free of dependence on anything but oneself. Such independence is the ideological qualification necessary for taking on the status of a member of a rational public. One doesn't violate another individual and the other reciprocates in kind. The mass body, by contrast, makes moments of conscious awareness of one's "own" body and the disinterested observation of one's surroundings impossible. Miss Lonelyhearts may not have the capacity to recognize his supplicants as himself, but the novel won't sustain the protagonist's illusion of individuality and demonstrates that Miss Lonelyhearts shares the condition of the mass. He sickens and dies a violent death at the hands of one of his supplicants, which makes him into a part of the very circulation of information from which the confessional mode affords him rhetorical distance. Only a fantasmatic individual occupies the position in the tower at the center of the tower. The novel has a gun "explode" (58) within the body of Miss Lonelyhearts-the-would-be-individual to release and disperse this fantasy of self-containment.

AFTERWARD

The novels of the 1930s on which I have focused conjure up a series of potential futures that resist identity as such by revealing and refusing the rhetorical procedures that had, for two centuries, allowed readers to imagine that the multitude could be transformed into a representative individual or group of individuals. In this respect, the writing of Faulkner, Barnes, and West performs a different sort of affective labor than the work of what we might call mainstream modernism, novels that obsessively elaborated individuated consciousness until it contains, for example, everything one might encounter during a day in London or Dublin. The texts I've selected show that the body cannot be so contained; it escapes, bypasses, refuses, or simply becomes unknowable as and to individuated, instrumentalized forms of species-life. Such affective labor changes the very grounds for imagining the formation of collective life by suggesting that there is no constraint to another's freedom because there are neither others nor, consequently, any form of interpersonal relations which would allow an individual human being to sympathize with or to abject another. The novels on which I have focused, by contrast, show individual identity of any kind to be a burden rather than a freedom, much less a right. Instead these novels insist on immersing the reader in the experience of becoming an extension of the mass body. Faulkner, Barnes, and West create protagonists that are

both in and a part of the mass body, thus fundamentally outside—in an open zone—of one consciousness and one body.

Donna Haraway calls this condition one where humans live “as” and “in” a biological world well beyond their own species and even kingdom (*How Like a Leaf* 25). For Haraway, biology is not the world-in-itself, an object for humans (even novelists) to study, much less a purity of nature to which we can and should return. To the contrary, biology is a singular modality through which humans can experience a rhizomatic extension to all life. In much the same way, my study has tried to show how select novels create new forms of collectivity that link together singularities of every sort. As Deleuze describes this phenomenon, when “two [or more] heterogeneous series converge toward a paradoxical element, [this] is their ‘differentiator’” (*The Logic of Sense* 50-51). Such a “‘differentiator’” is not, however, a principle of division but rather a “principle of the emission of singularities” (51). “This element” is paradoxical, he contends, because it “belongs to no series; or rather, it belongs to both series at once and never ceases to circulate through them. It has therefore the property of always being displaced in relation to itself, of ‘being absent from its own place,’ its own identity” (52). This is the same paradox that defines all three of the novels of my study: each contains elements, whether in the form of protagonists, composites, or images, that belong to nothing and nobody, are essentially empty and, on that basis, full of potential, are both outside and inside the novel, and cannot be identified. The formal—and political—result is that the division between the novel’s inside and the world outside is undone—leaving us with potential worlds.

In an interview with a magazine that addressed a gay readership, Michel Foucault argued that “[t]o imagine ... that individuals [of the same sex] are beginning to love one another” *as* individuals—“there’s the problem” (“Friendship as a Way of Life” 307). This apparent non-sequitur came to mind as an appropriate way for me to conclude this project. The novels on which I focus can be considered queer in the sense that they are against the law, against “natural” or gendered reproduction, and against the notion that class struggle defines human history. More to my point, however, Foucault implies something entirely positive and non-antagonistic about relations that are based on sameness rather than on differences. Queerness in this ultimate sense applies equally well to the way these novels by Faulkner, Barnes, and West were thinking through human relationships decades before Foucault was born, thinking, that is, of relationships as bringing “together unforeseen lines of force” (307). I believe that *Light in August*, *Nightwood*, and *Miss Lonelyhearts* imagined relationships in just these terms and used them to transform the “order of things” into new and open-ended forms of life.

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