

Unbecoming Characters

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Abstract

Unbecoming Characters traces a central term, unbecoming, in order to provide a conceptual space to explore turns away from the subject and its subservience to narrative teleology and epistemology. Skepticism toward the value of that subject is indebted to the scholarship of Michel Foucault, D.A. Miller, Barbara Johnson, Saidiya Hartman, and Eunjung Kim, which reveals how the attainment of subject status excludes those with non-intelligible identities and desires and can even enact further oppression and harm. Instead of seeking to make more subject positions legible within the normative narrative, unbecoming, derived from the work of queer theorists and scholars such as Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, Eric Michaels, and Mel Y. Chen, provides an alternative to the false universality of this subject and to narrative's drive toward heterosexual adulthood, charting a path away from maturity, intelligibility, and sovereignty. Focusing on how form and language intersect with sexuality and subjectivity to undo epistemology and meaning, unbecoming seeks alternatives to, to use Miller's phrase, "becoming a Person" in twentieth and twenty-first century American texts.

The first chapter, "From text machine to sex machine: Language, Sex, and the Subject," establishes two central theoretical paradigms of the dissertation through de Man's concept of irony and Edelman, Berlant, and Bersani's theories of sex. A reading of Delany's *Babel-17* probes fault lines in the subject, revealing the affective range of unbecoming, from self-shattering to pleasure. My second chapter, "Unbecoming Characters: Alternatives to Identification and Agency in Comics Form," embraces the combination of "kid's stuff" and pornography negatively associated with comics in order to challenge interpretations of cuteness, abjection, and identification. "Showing some 'Clivage': Unbecoming Narrative and Visual Pleasure/Jouissance" takes up the previous chapter's concerns with pleasure, narrative, and

identification and applies them to film and film theory. ““Bad Mimesis’: Cuteness, Toxicity, and Unlikely Subjects” concludes the dissertation with a reading of Barnes’s *Nightwood* through the lenses of Ngai’s cuteness and Chen’s toxicity. By cultivating a perverse alternative to sovereign subjects, *Nightwood*’s characters “go down” rather than “grow up,” opposing a narrative teleology of growth.

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Unbecoming Characters

Introduction

In *Annihilation*, Alex Garland's 2018 adaptation of Jeff VanderMeek's 2014 science fiction novel by the same name, an all-female crew of scientists explore a geographical area affected by a mysterious phenomenon known as "the Shimmer." As the film's title implies, this mission is something of a suicide mission: the team of women is the twelfth team to venture into the area affected by the Shimmer and only one man from those previous expeditions has ever returned. The film begins with the protagonist, Lena, being interviewed by a research team after her return from the Shimmer, and jumps around in time, following the chronological journey of the all-female team deeper inside the Shimmer-affected area, but cutting between Lena's interviews after her return and her memories of the difficult relationship with her husband (who is the sole survivor of the previous mission). The fact that Lena's husband has returned, but returned "wrong," combined with her guilt over an extramarital affair with a colleague, is her motivation for entering the Shimmer; similarly, all of her colleagues have nothing to lose. The leader of the expedition, psychologist Dr. Ventress, has terminal stage cancer, while physicist Josie Radek always wears long sleeves to conceal her history of self-harm.

As the team progresses deeper into the Shimmer, they begin to notice strange things about their surroundings in addition to the visual effect of the shimmer and the uselessness of their communication devices. The plants manifest growth patterns never before seen in their species; the team is attacked by an alligator creature that has grown extra rows of teeth in a geometric spiral in its mouth. The result isn't necessarily alien—the plants and animals are recognizably earth species—but they have an uncanny closeness to the quotidian while still being somehow strange. Although *Annihilation* had a sizable budget, the special effects are relatively

understated—the Shimmer is rendered by a glossy, soap bubble iridescence in the background of every scene that is only occasionally punctuated by more dramatic horror sequences. The eerie quality of the subtle production design is amplified when the team comes upon an area that used to have human habitation. The ruins, engulfed in a giant tree, are framed in the center of the image, with a barely legible sign reading “Stop: Bio-Security Area.” Framing this central, man-made structure are flowering shrubs that appear to be in the shape of humans, each with melancholy bowed heads. The discovery of this plant life leads Lena and Josie to form a theory: the unusual effects of the light are actually connected to the absence of communication signals, the oneiric passage of time, and the weird biodiversity. The Shimmer is a phenomenon that refracts everything and combines it, taking alligator DNA and producing extra rows of teeth, or threading human DNA through plant DNA. While this explanation seems less plausible as the film gathers more examples of the effects of the Shimmer—during the night following this conversation, for example, the team encounters a terrifying bear-like creature that seems to have absorbed the last words of the woman it killed, rather than her DNA—the very arbitrariness and irrationality of the Shimmer points to its alien-ness. The premise of the film violates internal logic and consistency in order to deliver a message of annihilation that ultimately undoes meaning itself.

Indeed, the refractions of the Shimmer affect each of the characters differently. While Dr. Ventress and Lena have the most dramatic experiences of self-annihilation—Dr. Ventress vomits light that turns her inside-out and Lena embraces and eventually perhaps kills a faceless doppelganger that slowly takes on her physical appearance through mirroring—Josie’s quiet succumbing to the process the Shimmer effects in her body is the subtlest response but also the most interesting for my project. After a traumatic encounter with the bear creature that has killed

their fourth companion, Dr. Ventress leaves to go to the lighthouse where the Shimmer originated. As Lena departs to follow her the next morning, Josie explains why she is no longer invested in the mission: “Ventress wants to face it, you want to fight it, but I don’t think I want either of those things.” As she talks, a shot of the inside of her forearm, crossed with scars from cutting herself, reveals that plant matter has begun to grow out of her skin. She wanders away through the foliage as Lena follows her, and the subjective camera assumes the angle of Lena’s gaze as Josie in bloom is visible twice, briefly and partially, and always with her back to the camera. When Lena emerges into a meadow, Josie has disappeared or merged with the flowering person-shaped plants. Although we assume Josie has transformed, the camera remains in a long shot of the meadow dotted with plants, refusing to signal a conclusive answer. We might make assumptions about which plant creature Josie has become, but without a shot explicitly zooming in on one plant and marking it as individual from the others (still wearing her crescent moon necklace, for example) Josie’s ultimate fate remains open-ended and indeterminate. Moreover, since the phenomenon of the Shimmer’s refraction is so sketchily explained, we cannot assume that the people-shaped plants will not continue mutating and evolving, eventually transforming into a new shape that would be utterly unrecognizable as Josie.

In this sequence, Josie’s turn away from qualities positively associated with the normative liberal subject–agency, determination, self-knowledge—coincides with the camera’s willingness to let her transformation and ultimate fate remain indeterminate. While changes wrought to characters’ bodies by the Shimmer have earlier been seen as horrifying and tragic, and later, in Dr. Ventress’s character’s eruption from the inside, are figured as dramatic and even somewhat heroic, in this scene Josie’s self-annihilation instead reads as a turn away from these values and a drift into passivity. *Annihilation*’s embrace of narrative opacity and Josie’s

transformation into a blooming bush bring together the indeterminacy of meaning and the dissolution of the subject that are central to this dissertation. Josie's unbecoming a human subject, with its Ovidian echoes, presents a quiet challenge to humanist values frequently and unquestionably taken as good or desirable. While her transformation reads as passive, even gentle, acceptance, it is also deeply negative: in response to Ventress wanting to face it and Lena wanting to fight it, Josie only states that she "[doesn't] think that [she wants] either of those things." I open with this anecdote from *Annihilation* to show how my dissertation's central term, unbecoming, provides a conceptual space to explore the negativity of these turns away from the normative subject and its subservience to narrative teleology and epistemology.

Why question the subject? If agency and self-determination are hard-won rights, why not embrace them? Foundational to my skepticism of the moral rightness or desirability of the neoliberal subject is the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his writing on the history of the concept of sexuality. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault famously wrote about one of the results of a new proliferation of discourse around sexuality in Europe in the 18th century, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). In other words, Foucault argues here that the conception of sexuality as an identity category, something that defined someone and caused them to coalesce around a personality, is a historically contingent construction. This suggestion that sexuality had not always constituted an identity points to the ways that what might look like a mode of self-determination could also be an avenue of power and control. Certainly, as Foucault points out later in *Volume 1*, identity categories have their political uses. When he suggests that "homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified," he shows that

assigning individuals a category like homosexuality allows for the possibility of reverse discourse, where those who identify (or have been identified) as homosexuals can then advocate together on their own behalf (101). Nevertheless, the consolidation of perversions into personalities became another method by which the mechanisms of power—the state, medical institutions, the education system, etc.—were able to penetrate into people’s lives, tracking, surveilling, controlling, and even inciting self-regulation. In other words, becoming a personality (in this case defined by sexuality) entails becoming subject to diffuse lines of power and the violence that power inflicts. In the case of *Annihilation*’s Josie, her turn away from being a subject is also marked by her refusal to declare a position (“I don’t think I want either of those things”). Unbecoming provides a conceptual space to explore alternatives to being a self-regulating subject of structures of power.

Writing in a different register but informed by Foucault, D.A. Miller also questions the accepted good of becoming a “Person.” In the *Novel and the Police*, he expands Foucault’s historical concept of self-policing to its intersection with the novel, arguing that the liberal subject is in some ways a fiction shaped by reading novels. In a later work, *Jane Austen or the Secret of Style*, he continues to challenge the desirability of being a subject through Austen’s female protagonists. About the necessary humiliation suffered by these protagonists in the narrative trajectory of the marriage plot, their transformation from sparkling, stylish wits to brides-to-be, he writes, “at the same moment the heroine shrinks from style, she feels the sudden excitement of a desire long held in abeyance...: the desire *to be a Person*. The demeaned condition she formerly did everything in her power not to inhabit, she now shows an interest, an eagerness, even an enjoyment in coming to know, and getting to perform” (*Jane* 51). In other words, by finally acquiescing to the demands of the social order she tried so hard to avoid

through her charm and wit throughout the whole of the novel, the Austen heroine gladly exchanges her brilliance and style for an opportunity to become a “Person,” which in her case, means becoming a wife, which is to say, becoming subject to her husband: no longer Emma, but Mrs. Knightley. Miller problematizes that consummation devoutly to be wished by pointing out that this transformation leads to a “demeaned condition.” Although Miller writes about fictional characters, his work shows how respectability and recognition as a subject by society are not unambiguously positive: what might look like a gain for a woman in becoming the wife of a wealthy man is actually a loss.

Barbara Johnson puts it more bluntly in “They Urn It.” Becoming a “Person” for an Austen heroine, is to become a woman, which is to say a thing: “Women make good things; things make good women” (Johnson 72). Through a series of examples ranging from Heidegger’s philosophy to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Johnson lays out the many ways women have been figured as jars, urns, and vessels to be sexually taken advantage of, with “no perspective ...that validates female resistance” (73). Johnson’s first example of possibilities for female resistance stems from a reading of Ann Petry’s *The Street*, where the Black female protagonist who is repeatedly made into a thing because of her race and gender kills her attempted rapist, transforming him into a thing but herself into a killer (75). The second silver of female resistance is derived from the myth of Apollo and Daphne, who becomes a tree. In other words, one alternative to being a woman subject to the violence that is concomitant with being treated like a thing is to become a thing itself—to beat Apollo to the punch. Even becoming a thing doesn’t save Daphne from male violence. Johnson excerpts multiple interpretations of the story of Apollo and Daphne to show how critics have read Daphne’s transformation not as the solution to avoid getting raped, but as the myth of how a poet won his laurels: Apollo still gets a

piece of Daphne, but as a consolation prize for his art (76-77). Josie's transformation in *Annihilation* operates in a similar Ovidian register but without the consolation prize. When the camera refuses to confirm to the viewer that Josie has transformed, delivering only a long shot of a field of human-shaped shrubs rather than one single flowering bush, instead of becoming a laurel ready to be plucked, Josie lingers in an indeterminate unbecoming that lets her escape being pinned (or trimmed) down.

Working specifically within the context of race and legacies of slavery in the United States, Saidiya Hartman draws on Foucault's critique of the liberal subject as a subject of power in order to challenge the positive view of narratives of liberation during Reconstruction. In particular, Hartman attends to

the role of rights in facilitating relations of domination, the new forms of bondage enabled by proprietorial notions of the self, and the pedagogical and legislative efforts aimed at transforming the formerly enslaved into rational, acquisitive, and responsible individuals. From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjugation. As well, it leads us to question whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation 'human' can be borne equally by all. (6)

With Foucault, Hartman questions certain narratives of progress, showing how things widely accepted as good or desirable, such as rights and liberation, can, upon closer inspection, actually work to enact a different version of servitude and subjugation. In particular, she problematizes the utility and universality of terms like self, subject, citizen, and even, in the above passage, "human." Hartman "examines the forms of violence and domination enabled by the recognition of humanity, licensed by the invocation of rights, and justified on the grounds of liberty and

freedom” (6). Hartman points to the ways that what looks like liberation can actually conceal another form of subjugation and a pathway for insidious forms of violence and domination.

Eunjung Kim, in a queer and disabilities studies vein, also shows the human as a subject of violence in “Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects.” As Kim suggests in relation to certain forms of disability where agency or subjectivity might not be recognizable through ableist optics, “remedying objectification and dehumanization may end up simply prescribing subjectivity and agency in order to rehumanize othered bodies without questioning why the recognition of humanity relies on certain signs of subjectivity and agency” (298). In particular, Kim critiques feminist modes of reclaiming subjectivity by suggesting that they presuppose an ableist model of what the “human” should look like: “embodiment has often been narrowly imagined as able-bodied—characterized by willed desire, speech, seeing, refusal, mobility, purposiveness, intelligence, desire, and connection rather than by unintentionality, speechlessness, unseeing, acquiescence, immobility, inertness, incompetence, asexuality, and disconnection” (302). Instead, Kim advocates for an ethical project of unbecoming human as a becoming object, seeking places where humanness and object-ness overlap and spaces where the perceived violence of objectification becomes a space for nonviolence.

These eclectic examples testify to the ways that the umbrella of humanity or personhood doesn’t always extend comfortably over all subjects, and even how conferring human rights and identity labels can operate to injure and control rather than protect subjects. *Unbecoming Characters* joins this long line of skeptics to explore alternatives to these categories of domination and humiliation. My dissertation follows the central term, unbecoming, to track ways that literature presents alternatives to what Miller calls becoming “a Person” (*Jane* 51). In keeping with Foucault’s critique of identity categories, I follow a term that depicts an act or a

practice, rather than a stable category (or a “species”) (43). Instead of becoming a thing, unbecoming a Person charts a vector away from the impossible asymptote of full personhood or sovereignty into a mobile, indeterminate space between subject and object. As a gerund, a noun derived from a verb but describing an on-going or uncompleted action, the term itself refuses to settle as a noun, verb, or adjective and can modify both actions and subjects. Following this attentiveness to how language can resolve identities or render them unstable and open-ended, my dissertation focuses on how unbecoming manifests in language and how language is affected by unbecoming. By attending to the formal elements of science fiction, graphic narrative, film, and modernist novels, I trace how unbecoming works to undo subjects, unravel and bring together the grammar of graphic narrative, and even open up possibilities for a type of queered non-sovereign subject, perhaps impossible outside of fiction. Although these subjects, in their lack of agency and sometimes bodily dissolution, might be impossible to occupy outside of these representations, the paths they chart away from a narrative teleology of growing up or becoming mature heterosexual subjects allow for a critique of forms of living that persist in being seen as desirable or even inevitable and open up unexpected avenues to appreciate passivity and pleasure.

The term unbecoming brings with it a theoretical genealogy most notably from the fields of queer theory and queer studies. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam uses the term “unbecoming,” among others, to describe resistance grounded, counterintuitively, in a radical passivity, “a feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming woman but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy” (124). My project shares many qualities of Halberstam’s concept, notably an investment in negativity and self-negation and in desires that run counter to

sovereignty and agency. In developing this framework, Halberstam draws from “queer, postcolonial, and black feminisms” and insists on the role femininity and the woman, particularly in terms of masochism, has to play in this schema (126). While Halberstam locates female masochism as a productive site of radical passivity, it is distinguished from male masochism, which

certainly stakes out a territory very different from female performances of unraveling.

While the male masochist inhabits a kind of heroic antiheroism by refusing social privilege and offering himself up Christ-like as a martyr for the cause, the female masochist’s performance is far more complex and offers a critique of the very ground of the human. (139)

Interestingly, however, Halberstam’s concept also owes an acknowledged debt to Leo Bersani’s essay on masochism, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” where Bersani anatomizes the homophobic response to the AIDS crisis and diagnoses this phobic response, ultimately, as a rebuke to the ways that anal sex reveals that all sex is masochistic. According to Bersani’s reading of Freud, the aspect of sex that goes beyond the pleasure principle is self-shattering. Why, then, does Halberstam discount male masochism as a site of radical passivity? In the case of the AIDS epidemic, the idea of the male masochist “refusing social privileges” is absurd in the context of a disease that killed thousands but was unacknowledged as a national crisis by the president of the United States for years (Halberstam 139). Although my dissertation attends to the ways that unbecoming impacts gender or is even made possible by gender, unbecoming as I use it is not limited to women or femininity. Indeed, unbecoming reveals that the stability of categories like “human,” “woman,” or “heterosexual” is easily dislodged in encounters with sex or through irony in language. While my project shares Halberstam’s investment in masochism and draws on

Bersani's reading of sex, unbecoming here critiques not just "the very ground of the human" but also the ground of male and female (139).

My use of unbecoming also differs from Halberstam's in terms of definitions of passivity, agency, and refusal. Halberstam cites several performance art pieces as demonstrations of radical passivity, ending with an interview between José Esteban Muñoz and Nao Bustamante. Muñoz calls Bustamante a "vulnerability artist" because of the ways her work engages with physical precarity—throughout her performances, she balances on several ladders in high heels, at one point even carrying a lit sparkler—as well as socially dangerous positions involving race and femininity (Halberstam 143). About the ladder balancing, Bustamante states in the interview, "The work that I do is about not knowing the equipment, and not knowing that particular balance, and then finding it as I go" (qtd. in Halberstam 143). In other words, Bustamante deliberately goes into each of her performances with the real risk that she might fall and injure herself. Although Bustamante's "America the Beautiful" and the other prominent performance art piece that Halberstam mentions, Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece," both involve the artists placing themselves in positions of vulnerability and even danger—in the case of Ono's "Cut Piece," through violence directed at her by audience members equipped with scissors—both of them, as performances, are instances of the artists deliberately putting themselves into places of precarity. But this act of creating the framework for calculated vulnerability, even the act of choosing not to examine the ladders in order to maximize the possibility of physical danger, maps out a different relation to agency than Josie's "I don't think I want either of those things." By designing environments to encourage these experiences of passivity, Halberstam's performance artists do not escape agency. The valorization of refusal and resistance, against Josie's indeterminacy, still makes Halberstam's unbecoming reliant on a subject's ability to choose,

enacting what Kim would call ableist categories of “willed desire, ... refusal, mobility, [and] purposiveness” (302).

As an alternative, Eric Michaels’s *Unbecoming*, a diary written in the year between his AIDS diagnosis and his death, clearly documents the vulnerability of the body in a situation that he neither chose nor could refuse. Even as his deteriorating health leaves him increasingly passive in terms of his physical capabilities, Michaels retains a punishing, blistering wit, which he aims at targets ranging from overly sympathetic friends to inconsiderate neighbors to the uncaring and actively malevolent institution of Australian immigration. Although writing a diary might seem counter to unbecoming through its association with what Michael Moon calls in the preface to *Unbecoming* a “rich subjectivity,” Michaels shows that self-writing troubles agency and the coherence of the subject (xiv). Indeed, Michaels makes clear that his goal in writing is not to express his identity or to consolidate some sense of himself as a unique individual. In a Foucauldian vein, he writes, “I am convinced that had I been born only 20 years earlier (or maybe, 20 years later), I probably would not have been gay. Now, that’s logistically preposterous; 20 years difference and I wouldn’t have been ‘I.’ (Indeed, I have trouble with ‘I’-ness at every moment and writing is no cure for that at all.)” (6). In other words, by seeing his sexuality as historically, geographically, and socio-economically contingent, he puts pressure on sexuality as an immutable identity. He even suggests that selfhood is so historically contingent that he would not exist as himself at another period of time. The parenthetical that follows further problematizes any consolidation of identity by suggesting that “I have trouble with ‘I’-ness at every moment.” Instead of stabilizing identity or “I-ness,” Michaels’s self-writing and reflection on his identity destabilizes it. While Michaels’s *Unbecoming* gestures toward a body coming undone, it also points to the ways that he sees his subjectivity and identity as socially,

historically, and geographically contingent and the act of writing as both a method of cognizing and also of de-centering himself. Unbecoming here is a practice of simultaneously making and unmaking self-knowledge.

The very first sentences in Michaels's diary provide a more specific example of how writing dislocates the subject:

I watched these spots on my legs announce themselves over a period of weeks, taking them as some sort of morphemes, arising out of the strange uncertainties of the past few years to declare, finally, a scenario. As if these quite harmless-looking cancers might, when strung together, form sentences which would give a narrative trajectory, a plot outline, at last to a disease and a scenario that had been all too vague. (3)

The lesions from Kaposi sarcoma, an opportunistic cancer associated with the transition from HIV into AIDS, occupy an uneasy position in this sentence as both the object of what Michaels watches ("these spots") and the subject of the verb "announce." Michaels himself, the "I" doing the watching, is both the subject of the sentence and a passive onlooker, enacting through pronouns both a sense of distancing and possession. The second sentence moves agency even further from Michaels, as it implies that the "quite harmless-looking cancers" are forming the sentences, rather than he, the writer. The unbecoming that is taking hold of his body and deforming his shape is simultaneously giving shape to the disease—a shape that is specifically literary in its "narrative trajectory" and "plot outline." Again, Michaels's self-writing troubles the reality of his selfhood, this time through diction related to the theater and fiction. Michaels's example here shows how unbecoming operates not just to trouble his own relationship to his body, but also how it works in his language to unravel a sense of self. While Michaels's bodily unbecoming is unspooling without his consent, we can see in his language how he cognizes this

experience by giving and taking mobile versions of agency. The act of cognition, of giving his situation a “plot outline,” simultaneously makes Michaels and his spots actors in a script that Michaels does not control. As in the unbecoming of the previous example, Michaels’s sense of agency is split between an attempt to know or understand his situation through authoring a diary and, in that diary, relating the feeling of a passive actor moved along a narrative trajectory. But this example further complicates the way that narrative plays into unbecoming. While unbecoming disarticulates the shape of Michaels’s life by sapping his energy, limiting his mobility, and eventually taking his life, unbecoming is also predicated on articulating the shape of the disease. As the disease becomes narrative, Michaels unbecomes. Both of these examples from Michaels’s diary index unbecoming’s negativity. In its dialectical sinuousness, unbecoming both enacts a kind of linguistic performance—an attempt to generate knowledge, narrative, or to consolidate a sense of the self—and thwarts that gesture, instead undoing epistemological certainty and sovereignty.

Language is an ideal place to trace this unbecoming pattern. In *Animacies*, Mel Y. Chen also begins from a place of illness to explore a concept, animacies, that traces contiguities between queer of color critique, critical animal studies, affect theory, disability studies, and linguistics. *Animacies* shares with unbecoming an attention to language and form and a reevaluation of agency. In particular, Chen became interested in animacy as a result of certain patterns of language that arose from their illness due to prolonged exposure to mercury throughout their childhood; as Chen notes, despite telling their friends they were gradually “feeling more alive again,” this association of aliveness with health is immediately troubling: “surely I had been no *less* alive when I was *more* sick, except under the accountings of an intuitive and immediately problematic notion of ‘liveliness’ and other kinds of ‘freedom’ and

‘agency’” (1). Chen continues to unpick binaries between illness and agency by turning to a phrase commonly used to express the linguistic concept of animacy, “the hikers that rocks crush” (2). Chen states that English speakers frequently find this phrase difficult to process, suggesting that

they tend to prefer animate head nouns to go with subject-extracted relative clauses (the hikers *who* __ *crushed the rock*), or inanimate head nouns to go with object-extracted relative clauses (the rock *that the hikers crushed* __). Add to this that there is a smaller plausibility that rocks will agentively crush hikers than that hikers will crush rocks: a conceptual order of things, an animate hierarchy of possible acts, begins to take shape.

(2-3)

Perhaps because the likelihood of rocks crushing a hiker seems extremely plausible, I (and fellow graduate students) had little difficulty in parsing the original phrase, “the hikers that rocks crush”; indeed, the “preferred” versions excerpted at length above might cause more confusion about who is supposed to be crushing whom. In an English preference for using “who” as the subject of a relative clause to describe human referents, I rephrased the original, “the hikers that rocks crush,” as “the hikers who are crushed by rocks.” A friend, in another English preference for avoiding the passive voice, rephrased it as “the rocks crush the hikers.” Both of these examples index English language practices for determining personhood and privileging agency: use “who” in a relative clause when the referent is human; whenever possible, convert passive voice to active. But despite these tendencies in grammar to privilege values my dissertation critiques, the way the verb in the relative clause suddenly shifts from active to passive in my revision also shows how I see unbecoming necessarily performed through language: the alchemy

of grammar, in Michaels's sentences excerpted above and in this phrase dissected by Chen, renders agents passive or animates objects such as rocks or spots.

The debt that unbecoming pays to language in its ability to form and deform subjects is apparent in another essay from Johnson's *Persons and Things*, "Ego Sum Game." Through readings of Descartes—who, according to Johnson, uses a linguistic trick to prop up his own existence—and Lacan, who is known for bringing even more acute linguistic attention to Freudian psychoanalysis, Johnson suggests that the idea of subjectivity, or the "self," might in itself be a fiction. As Johnson writes about Descartes's Cogito, "Nothing Descartes writes proves that the being whose existence he has demonstrated was human: he discovered certainty only in the subject ('I am'), and not in any predicate ('I am X'). The mechanism hiding beneath those hats and cloaks might only be the mechanics of language" (51). In this sense, Johnson sees language as both conditioning the possibility for Descartes's being and curtailing its ability to be irrefutably human; drawing from an earlier fear Descartes expressed about the automaton, Johnson suggests that in his interior, instead of a "rich subjectivity," to reuse Moon's phrase quoted above, we might find only the gears and wheels of grammar. In this sense, she separates out the "self," or subjectivity, from the subject of the sentence by proving that asserting one's "I" only goes so far as to make one a subject in language, not necessarily a "self." Johnson expands this argument about the constructedness of human subjectivity with a reading of Lacan's mirror stage, where the disempowered child misrecognizes himself as whole and upright in the mirror. As Johnson puts it, "henceforth the real self for the subject is the one in the mirror: the total form of a body standing erect and transcending all support. An idealization. A fiction. An object" (57). According to Johnson's reading of the mirror stage, in order to become a subject, we must identify not only with a fiction, but with an image, an aesthetic fiction: a representation.

Separating the subject from the human body and revealing the subject as the product of identification with a representation is useful for contextualizing my dissertation because it differentiates my project's unbecoming from Halberstam and Michaels's respective terms. If the subject is necessarily always a fiction, and if it is harmful for the reasons discussed by Foucault, Hartman, Miller, and Kim, then we should explore what possibilities emerge from unbecoming the subject. But lived experiences of unbecoming must happen *to* the subject, which precludes the possibility of choosing them, and might ultimately result in death, which perpetuates a different form of harm. Intersections between body and self-representation, as in Michaels's diary, allow for a situation where his bodily experience contributes to the type of self-complication that he also experiences in the act of self-writing. In *Unbecoming Characters*, however, I limit my examples to representations and not lived experiences or bodies because I seek possibilities for bodies and forms that can endure in unbecoming, bodies found in mediums like graphic narrative or film or in genres like science fiction. But, counterintuitively, my project also focuses on unbecoming representations because this is ultimately where the subject is formed: the cohesive, sovereign, form as which we misrecognize ourselves in the mirror. By analyzing representation, unbecoming targets the moment when the act of creating this fantasmatic, sovereign form reveals its incoherence.

As the above examples might suggest, I find my unbecoming archive in representations of sexuality and queerness, which, like self-writing, can both categorize and undo the subject. As Halberstam, Michaels, and Chen attest, I am far from alone in associating queerness with challenges to the subject or even the "human." In a 2015 volume of *GLQ*, focused on Queer Inhumanisms, Dana Luciano and Chen ask through their provocative title: "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" While the answer they settle on is both yes and no, they assert that queer theory

has long been entangled in conversations of humanism because “many of queer theory’s foundational texts interrogate, implicitly or explicitly, the nature of the ‘human’ in its relation to the queer, both in their attention to how sexual norms themselves constitute and regulate hierarchies of humanness, and as they work to unsettle those norms and the default forms of humanness they uphold” (186). Although my project shifts the terms of this interrogation slightly—focusing on the question of subjectivity or the subject rather than the concept of the “human” in its entirety—I also seek to put pressure on categories associated with humanness. Echoes of my opening reading of Josie’s annihilation resonate in Luciano and Chen’s definition of the “human”: “rational, bounded, integral, sovereign, and self-aware...the figure to whom rights and citizenship are granted; ... the default figure that grounds and personifies norms of behavior, ability, and health; ... the figure around which we ordinarily construct notions of political and social agency” (190). While some queer scholars have sought to expand the possibility of legibility under this tacitly limited definition (as Luciano and Chen suggest, this “human” is covertly male and always white), opening more space within the category of the “human,” with critics such as Foucault, Hartman, Miller, and Kim, the unbecoming on which the dissertation focuses interrogates the value of seeking sovereignty, self-awareness, legibility, and agency.

My project deviates from Chen and Luciano’s, however, in its deliberate favoring of representation over realism. Luciano and Chen take post structuralist thinkers to task for an over-reliance on representation—“despite their identification as antihumanist, both structuralism and post-structuralism ... remained, in the view of many thinkers associated with the nonhuman turn, irredeemably anthropocentric insofar as they privileged (human) epistemology over ontology, language over matter, ‘representation’ over ‘realism’” (189-190). As my earlier readings of

Michaels, Chen, and Johnson suggest, however, while language can be a place that affirms anthropocentrism, it is also a valuable place of critique and transformation, conferring agency, for example, on Kaposi sarcoma lesions, making hikers the passive prey of falling rocks, and transforming the Cogito into a magic trick that confers subjectivity on clockwork. Indeed, Luciano and Chen build their critique of anthropocentrism on a representation, opening their introduction with a close reading of a Laura Aguilar photograph, *Grounded #114*. About the photograph, a self-portrait where Aguilar's broad back rhymes visually with the boulder behind her, they suggest that

as in other feminist self-portraits, the female body refuses either to open itself to appropriation by the viewer or to position itself as the object of the male gaze. Ironically, though, Aguilar performs this refusal not by intensifying her apparent status as subject (through, say, a defiant facial expression or virtuosic posturing) but by turning away from the demand for recognition within the circle of humanity. By mimicking a boulder, Aguilar enters the very nonhuman fold where some would place her, effectively displacing the centrality of the human itself. (184)

This photograph allows a reading that likens Aguilar to Daphne—responding to a hegemonic, normative refusal of her right to subjectivity by excusing herself from that framework entirely. By performing this gesture through a photograph of herself, however, Aguilar is able to both de-center the human *and* produce a self-portrait, interacting with a genre associated with self-awareness and subjectivity even as she turns away from those qualities through her visual thematics. Like Michaels's self-writing, this self-portraiture troubles "'I'-ness," where we see Aguilar as both artist and boulder. As Aguilar's photograph shows, instead of centering the human, representation offers powerful avenues to critique anthropocentrism, the category of the

human, and the universalizing assumption that everyone might want intelligibility as a subject. My project, then, pays close attention to form in order to articulate the ways unbecoming representations destabilize epistemology, narrative, and signification.

In this way, *Unbecoming Characters* takes seriously Lee Edelman's injunction in *No Future* that "rather than expanding the reach of the human, as in Butler's claim for Antigone, we might, with Leonard and the birds, insist on enlarging the inhuman instead—or enlarging what, in its excess, in its unintelligibility, exposes the human itself as always misrecognized catachresis, a positing blind to the willful violence that marks its imposition" (152). Instead of seeking to make non-normative forms of subjectivity legible in terms of their sovereignty and agency, as Butler does with Antigone, I see in unbecoming an opportunity to explore where subjectivity is undone and meaning is unmade. Because even as working toward intelligibility might parallel the political utility of Foucault's reverse discourse, so frequently it also comes at the cost of falling into the grooves of the social order's recognizable narrative patterns (as in homonormativity). For example, we can see how intelligibility and narrative closure cut off the possibilities of unbecoming characters in Edelman's reading of the resolution of *North by Northwest*. For if Leonard is the *sinthomosexual* figured and realized, then Roger O. Thornhill is the tragedy of Austen's *stylothete*—the female protagonist before becoming a Person—transferred to a male register. At the beginning of the film, Thornhill occupies the space of irony and also an absence of rich internal subjectivity. His impeccable verbal and sartorial style together with his inability to take anything seriously, expressed through Cary Grant's vaudevillian performance that broadcasts emotions directly on his face, connect Thornhill to the sparkle and surface that distance him from being a Person. Thornhill's very plight reinforces this reading—he has so little that identifies him as a unique, sovereign subject that he is immediately and repeatedly mistaken

for an imaginary creation of the United States government: he is a man who does not exist. As Edelman notes, only when Thornhill's language moves from the register of irony into an intelligible, earnest plea for help does he become a Person; the transition from "Help! Help me!" to the final scene is the voiceover that informs the audience that there is now a Mrs. Thornhill (who is not his mother). In other words, the implacable vector of narrative forces Thornhill into becoming intelligible—to move away from irony and immaturity and into the heterosexual expectations of the adult subject legible as human.

Unbecoming provides an alternative to narrative's drive toward heterosexual adulthood, instead tracing characters and trajectories that chart a backwards path away from maturity, intelligibility, and sovereignty. Accordingly, my project focuses on how form and language intersect with sexuality and subjectivity to undo epistemology and meaning. Bringing together the linguistic concerns of Michaels, Chen, and Johnson, Halberstam's attention to masochism and alternatives to agency, and the emphasis on intelligibility and irony raised by Edelman, unbecoming seeks to identify alternatives to "becoming a Person" in texts as varied as Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, Emil Ferris's *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*, and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*.

My first chapter uses close readings of *Babel-17* and Paul de Man's "Concept of Irony" to ask how sex and sexuality engage with language to produce unbecoming. Since language and sex are both sites where the subject comes undone, I examine several sex scenes from *Babel-17* to determine more fault lines in the subject, supported by theoretical work from Edelman and Lauren Berlant's *Sex, or the Unbearable* and Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Although *Babel-17* uses science fiction to pose these questions about sex, subjectivity, and language, I also incorporate readings of Lydia Davis's short stories, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Jessica

Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* to show how this question about language and sex plays out in other genres.

My second chapter takes this constellation of terms—sexuality, language, and unbecoming—and refocuses them through the medium of comics. Through close readings of Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Ferris's *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, and Charles Burns's *Black Hole*, I ask why certain moments of formal unbecoming in comics—places where the written text and the images produce a profusion of possible pathways to reading that disrupt any dominant narrative trajectory—coincide with the medium's depictions of queerness as well as with its often low cultural status. My chapter examines why comics have been perceived as bringing together “kid stuff” (cartoons and superhero comics) and pornography, drawing evidence of comics's unbecoming practice from examples of queer sexuality or “inappropriate” behavior (female or non-white rage). By pairing Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection with Sianne Ngai's concept of cuteness, it articulates a nauseating closeness between the two, revealing in unbecoming a kind of monstrous passivity that is queerly tender.

While my previous chapter theorized unbecoming through comics texts, the third chapter reads theory closely, particularly theories associated with film technology and reception. Beginning with careful consideration of both Roland Barthes's *Le plaisir du texte* and Walter Benjamin's “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” the chapter works to uncover places where meaning and epistemology (and consequently a sense of the subject as sovereign or cohesive) fail. Following the previous chapter's acknowledgement of the unbecoming cultural reception of comics, this chapter addresses another kind of audience engagement through Christian Metz's apparatus theory in order to consider the unbecoming role of pleasure and unpleasure in cinema. Taking as its examples the controversial (and, for some,

notoriously unpleasurable) films *Under the Skin* (2013) and *Crash* (1996), I use my readings of theory to determine where meaning, pleasure, and jouissance variously fail and flourish in cinematic representation. A final discussion of Barthes's essay, "Leaving the Movie Theater," with *Under the Skin* allows me to propose a new method of enjoying film that attends to the skepticism that characterizes such feminist and critical race theory thinkers as bell hooks and Laura Mulvey without discounting the unbecoming possibilities of pleasure.

My final chapter turns back to the earliest text, chronologically speaking, considered in my dissertation: *Nightwood*. It pursues questions about representation and form, sex and sexuality, and subjectivity through readings of this modernist novel and because *Nightwood*, like comics, uneasily juxtaposes "kid stuff" with pornography, this chapter also calls upon Ngai's theories of cuteness to explain *Nightwood*'s troubling of form and its representation of sexuality and subjectivity. I yoke cuteness to Chen's concept of the toxic in order to bring out the negativity, and hence the queerness, of Barnes's characters. I conclude with close readings of the final scene of *Nightwood* alongside Virginia Woolf's *Flush* to elucidate how Barnes's characters avoid the fate of becoming a Person. Transposing Miller's writing on free indirect discourse and personhood in Austen to the character of Robin Vote, I begin to sketch the shape of an intoxicated subject of cuteness. One of the possibilities of this non-normative subject, I argue, can be found in the novel's insistence on a kind of "going down rather than growing up"—a narrative teleology opposed to progression, growth, and maturation.

As I write, on May 14, 2020, Michigan's State Capitol building was forced to shut down because armed protesters threatened to kill the female, Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, unless she retracted stay at home orders. Legislative sessions were canceled; protesters protected

by Michigan law carried guns openly in front of the Capitol (Villarreal). While these protesters' insistence on the right to die from COVID-19 might seem similar to the annihilation that opened this introduction, their prominent gun waving and emphasis on individual freedom instead points toward phallocentrism's intersection with values associated with the liberal subject. When Bersani details the phobia of penetration and its connection to a loss of phallic power in "Is the Rectum a Grave?," he writes, "Phallocentrism is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all *the denial of the value of powerlessness in both men and women*" (24, my emphasis). By decentering agency, the subject, and sovereignty, by embracing powerlessness, unbecoming provides a corrective to the phallocentrism that drives a gun-toting mob to be so afraid of feeling under the control of a woman, so afraid of their curtailed agency in the face of a global pandemic, that they instead jeopardize their own health and threaten the lives of others.

COVID-19 has interrupted the smooth functioning of the American narrative: rites of passage such as proms, SAT testing, and graduations have been cancelled; weddings have been postponed; and the everyday anchor of responsible adult life, work, has disappeared or transformed to the point that it is unrecognizable. In its disproportionate effects on low-income communities, communities of color, and undocumented people, among many other groups, this disease has also given the lie to the American narrative and revealed its precarity or inaccessibility—the ways, as mentioned earlier in this introduction, that full personhood is an impossible asymptote. Writing these lines during this attenuated pause emphasizes the importance of unbecoming as an alternative to advocating for more space for protagonists in the American narrative; instead of expanding intelligibility and incorporating more subject positions into the normal, we might ask, as Edelman puts it, "Why not endorse, to the contrary,

‘epistemological self-destruction’ for all? Why not accept that queerness, taken seriously, demands nothing less?” (Dinshaw et al 195). Since “epistemology” rhymes with the values associated with Chen and Luciano’s critique of the human—“rational, ... sovereign, and self-aware”—values that exist to privilege some at the expense of others, and indeed values that obscure the domination, self-deception, and violence of subjectification, the antidote is not to make space within that system but to undo it altogether (190). Given these stakes, *Unbecoming Characters* explores, in the realm of fictional representations and theoretical writing, eruptions of the normative narrative progression into mature, rational, sovereign adulthood. Adding to the work of these scholars critical of the liberal subject and its associated values, this project seeks out cracks in the subject and its narrative to amplify occasions for alternatives to the impossible asymptote of personhood, advocating instead for opportunities for unbecoming and pleasure.

From text machine to sex machine: Language, Sex, and the Subject

The Butcher's egoless brutality ... was for all its horror, still human. Though bloody-handed, he was safer than the precision of the world linguistically corrected. What could you say to a man who could not say 'I'?
(Delany 146)

“Somewhere in Eden now, a worm, a worm”: Language and Betrayal

When Paul de Man proposed, during a series of lectures culminating with a reading of Walter Benjamin's “Task of the Translator,” “that it is not at all certain that language is in any sense human,” the conversation after his lecture seethed with excitement (87). Most other themes that de Man had addressed during this lecture—the role of translation and its parallels to literary criticism, the uneasy relationship between translation and metaphor—went largely unaddressed. The drama of the suggestion of the “inhuman” in language, that the inhuman might comprise language, electrified and polarized the audience, despite de Man's insistence on language's prosaic nature. For de Man, the inhumanity in language lay in its grammatical and linguistic rules: “the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language — independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have” (96). This inhumanity of the uncontrollable aspect of language is precisely opposed to intent, and so intent and meaning are aligned with the human; de Man suggests that “If language is not necessarily human ... there can be no intent; there may be an intent of meaning, but there is no intent in the purely formal way in which we will use language independently of the sense or the meaning” (87). According to de Man, the very thing we use for intersubjectivity and self-expression is precisely opposed to any guarantee that others will understand what we mean when we use language or that the language we use is in any way representative of what we intend to mean.

This insistence on an opposition between intention and language, an intended meaning and a perceivable meaning, is repeated in another lecture, “The Concept of Irony,” in which de Man uses a quotation loosely adapted from Friedrich Schlegel¹, “words understand each other often better than those who make use of them,” to talk about how language functions independently of the intentions of its speaker (181). Instead of using this quotation to craft a folksy tale of solidarity between words against the oppressors who attempt to manipulate them, however, de Man describes the vertiginous play of the mechanics of language that move a statement away from the intention of its author, which he calls the text machine:

Words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say. You are writing a splendid and coherent philosophical argument but, lo and behold, you are describing sexual intercourse. Or you are writing a fine compliment for somebody and without your knowledge, just because words have a way of doing things, it’s sheer insult and obscenity that you are really saying. There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness, ... which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes ... the basis of any narration. (181)

While Schlegel’s quote anthropomorphizes words by implying that they have a mode of communicating and understanding each other, de Man figures words in the opposite direction to emphasize the technical, inhuman aspects of language by naming this irony in language the “text

¹ Interestingly, de Man attributes this quotation to Goethe, as cited in Schlegel, a moment that in fact never exists. Goethe does appear in the Schlegel essay in question, “On Incomprehensibility,” but in an entirely different section. In fact, in the passage where de Man seems to be deriving the phrase, Schlegel is writing about philosophical language, not poetic language. Whether this mistake is further evidence of the intention-twisting work of irony or a simple misprision on de Man’s part, we shall never know!

machine.” But de Man’s language also takes another, perhaps entirely unsolicited turn, through his choice of examples: the author’s intentions are always lofty, fine, or even abstract, but the language used turns against this meaning and produces instead something unavoidably embodied or unbecoming. This constant redirection of philosophical intentions into obscene counterparts suggests that within the text machine there is a sex machine, an equally implacable force that can at any moment turn whatever words the author is using into vulgar innuendo.²

As these readings from de Man indicate, language in its use initiates a division between the intentions of its author and the interpretable meaning of that author’s product. Language is fundamentally divisive not only in the sense of what de Man might call its inhuman-ness or its irony, but also in the very construction of the sign, which necessitates a separation between the thought-image and the sound-image that signifies that concept (de Saussure 67). Instead of producing the signified itself, language introduces distance between the signified and the signifier. We can see this distance turn into a gaping abyss in something like de Man’s “The Concept of Irony,” where signs turn against their author in order to form unforeseen obscenities. Samuel R. Delany’s 1966 science fiction novel, *Babel-17*, illustrates and complicates these problems with language by introducing a special, alien language (Babel-17) that *seems* to operate like the undivided, Biblical *fiat lux* but actually produces the same betrayals language does in ordinary speech. Captain Rydra Wong—a gifted poet, codebreaker-linguist, and telepath—translates this alien, analytical language and believes that by using it, she’s able to collapse the space between the thing itself and the medium of communication. Without her knowledge,

² In the passage from Schlegel that most closely follows what de Man attributes to Goethe, he writes, “I wanted to demonstrate that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them, wanted to point out that there must be a connection of some secret brotherhood among philosophical words that, like a host of spirits too soon aroused, bring everything into confusion in their writings and exert the invisible power of the World Spirit on even those who try to deny it” (260). Whether or not de Man’s insistence on the text machine has infected my reading, I can’t help but notice phrases such as “a host of spirits too soon aroused” and attribute to them obscene, erotic overtones.

however, the alien language works against her, subverting her conscious will and leading her to sabotage her own ship.

We might think that, because it appears in a science fiction novel about space travel and telepathy, Babel-17 is a special language, one that operates entirely differently from the “earth languages” we know and speak.³ However, just as “words understand each other often better than those who make use of them,” words in Babel-17 collude with each other rather than their speaker (de Man 181). Because Babel-17 has been programmed by “the Invaders” from the other side of an intergalactic war, each time Rydra uses the language, it induces her to sabotage her Alliance compatriots and then to forget that betrayal. Language in *Babel-17*, then, has the power to betray the intentions of its speakers but also to give them something in return, a surplus of unintended meaning and sometimes even a surplus of sexual energy. Although language in the novel behaves uncontrollably in relation to its speakers, it also produces scenes of desire and ecstasy. Babel-17 departs from de Man’s readings, however, with the infectious ways it changes its speaker; in irony, de Man claims that the intention of the author could be subverted through the text machine, but *Babel-17* suggests that language and sex have the additional power to alter or even shatter the subject who speaks. Although *Babel-17* has been written about primarily in

³ *Babel-17* is frequently used as an example of how science fiction defamiliarizes language. For example, Joseph P. Weakland mentions *Babel-17* as a way to contextualize the history of alien languages in science fiction in “‘Forked Tongues’: Languages of Estrangement in China Miéville’s *Embassytown*.” Isiah Lavender III reads Rydra’s linguistic acuity of as a model of how science fiction can use alien languages or telepathy in order to speak across racial, social, and military borders in “Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael’s Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, and Samuel R. Delany’s *Babel-17*.” In “Created Languages in Science Fiction,” Ria Cheyne lists Babel-17, among many other examples, as an alien language that represents a sense of difficulty in encountering alienness in other cultures. Even Robert Luckhurst’s reading, in which he claims that the difficulties faced by Rydra and other Alliance officers in encountering Babel-17 could operate on a metalevel as a parallel for the generic difficulties encountered by non-readers of sf when reading the novel, suggests that Babel-17 represents an encounter with something fundamentally different than the languages we are accustomed to using.

terms of its work with language, race,⁴ or sexuality,⁵ I have chosen the novel because, despite critical insistence on Delany's status as an "anti-pornographer" or as an author "who is deeply concerned about what it means to be human," *Babel-17* exemplifies the deformations of the subject that are enacted by language and sex (Shepherd 132, Nilon 62). By reading more generically conventional postmodern literary texts, like Lydia Davis' short stories, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, alongside *Babel-17*, I hope to show that, although the science fiction of Delany's text allows for a more obvious transformation of conventional ideas of the human through the uncontrollable relation between language and sex, this constellation is far from unique to science fiction. Following irony's surplus of obscenity produced in language, I look specifically at sex scenes to find moments not only where the speaker's intentions are shattered, but also where the subject itself is undone. These scenes emphasize the precariousness of the cohesive subject, and, in Delany's work, introduce an alternative, unbecoming form of subjectivity. I open my dissertation with this configuration of terms and texts in order to establish a series of shifting paradigms in which unbecoming operates to shatter the self, undo the subject, and challenge processes of meaning-making. As the central term in my dissertation, unbecoming is elaborated here through language and sex, two situations

4 Although many scholars note the white-dominated status of science fiction, Delany is known for attentiveness to people of color in his texts. In "The Insistent Presence of Black Folk in the Novels of Samuel R. Delany," for example, Sandra Y. Govan praises *Babel-17* for its Asian protagonist and other prominent characters of color. Gregory E. Rutledge insists on the importance of considering Du Bois's double consciousness in order to understand the double function of *Babel-17* while reading the novel in "Science Fiction and the Black Power/Arts Movement: The Transpositional Cosmology of Samuel R. Delany Jr." In "Futurist Fiction and Fantasy: The *Racial Establishment*" Rutledge even calls Delany the "Father of Black FFF [futurist fiction and fantasy] literature and criticism" (243).

5 In the chapter, "Queer in a Queer World," Ira Livingston suggests that Rydra's previous experience in a ménage à trois could be a parallel for Delany's own household at the time, which consisted of his wife and poet, Marilyn Hacker, and a second male member referred to only as Bob in Delany's memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (161). Rob Latham praises *Babel-17*'s convincing, almost blasé representations of bisexuality and triune relationships in "Bisexuality and New Wave SF."

that trouble the fantasmatic coherence of the subject and simultaneously enable and thwart processes of signification.

The term “fiat lux” refers to the Latin translation of the moment in Genesis when “God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis, chapter 1 verse 3). This moment mythologizes an origin point for language as something once unified and indivisible, without any separation between signifier and referent, without any space between intention and meaning. God’s fiat is not just a command to be implemented later but a simultaneous declaration and creation. Jacques Derrida reflects on the emphasis placed on the voice of God and its ability to create in *Of Grammatology*, where that *fiat lux* indicates the “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (12). Babel-17 doesn’t work in exactly the same way as the God-like *fiat lux*, but because of the ways the language converts ideas into their smallest analytic units, it facilitates a speed of thought and action that increases the proximity between word and thing. As Rydra muses, “What would [Babel-17] do with the tensions and yearnings in a human face? Perhaps the flicker of eyelids and fingers would become mathematics, without meaning” (140). By suggesting that becoming mathematics is to render something without meaning, Rydra has it wrong. By converting these flickers into an abstraction of numbers and formulae, Rydra gains access to information at a level of density that allows her to analyze and process people’s intentions and emotions with lightning speed. Later Rydra admits that “Babel-17 is such an exact technical language, it almost assures you technical mastery of any situation you look at” (215). Like the omnipotent mastery of God, able to create through speech alone, the analytical exactness of Babel-17 gives its speaker mastery over warfare, crime, and attempted assassination.

In the scene where Rydra decides to interpret the facial cues she sees with the help of Babel-17, the text reflects the depth of information conveyed through Babel-17 by narrating, in small, in-set text boxes, what someone would see if they were thinking in English. For example, in a text box in the upper left-hand corner of the page, the text reads “*Around her people were sitting, relaxing, while the serving people hurried to the food counter where the roasts and fried fruit steamed,*” but alongside it in the body of the page, the text reads, “man named Geoffry Cord in whose brain crossed wires sparked and sputtered *Make death with the knife I have sheathed to my leg*” (141). Like a swiftly moving stream of consciousness, Rydra’s thoughts in Babel-17 flow rapidly from one to the other, lacking the kind of final punctuation that would separate or slow their pace. Over the space of seven sentences in text boxes, Rydra processes three pages of information and discovers that this minor character, Geoffry Cord, has planned a somewhat baroque plot to take over the large space base where she is staying. Rydra thinks,

no yes, she was able, even as she walked to pick up the words and image that would drive and push him to her betrayal and no yes, once struck by his fear and rebounding, she brought herself back to a single line that scribed through both perception and action, speech and communication, no yes, both one now, picking down sounds that would persuade with the deliberation this lengthened time lent and ... tossed her words now from the sling of her vibrant voice, so that they hung outside her, and she watched them and watched his watching: the rhythm which was barely intricate to most ears in the commons was to him painful because it was timed to the processes of his body, to jar and strike against them. (142-143)

Instead of thinking of these as communicating concepts separate from the words themselves, Rydra feels perception and action, speech and communication, together, indicating through “both

one now” that the gap between words and things has closed. As a result of this collapse, she is able to use words as a weapon, not in the abstract way that the pen is mightier than the sword, but in a way that the rhythm of the words is deliberately tailored to jar and echo in Cord’s body. Even the way Delany figures these words indicates that they’ve been given substance; they “hung outside her” and seem to have taken on enough shape that she can “watch them.”

Part of the reason why Babel-17 has such rapid, compressed, analytical exactitude is that it resembles a computer language. At the end of the novel, Rydra explains that “Babel-17 is more or less like Onoff, Algol, Fortran,” which her therapist, Dr. T’mwarba, defines as “ancient, twentieth-century computer languages—artificial languages that were used to program computers, designed especially for machines” (198, 199). This link between Babel-17 and programming language is highlighted in its lack of “I” or “you” pronouns. The gap de Saussure describes between concept and sound image is flattened for a machine, whose only reality consists of an internal coding that allows it to function; without an idea of meaning separate from its programming, neither a concept nor a sound image exist. Rydra gestures toward the level at which computers inhabit their coding when she explains why merely speaking Babel-17 was enough to cause her to sabotage her own ship and, more dramatically, for her friend the Butcher to take up an entirely new, subject-free life after experiencing amnesia: “You can program a computer to make mistakes, and you do it not by crossing wires, but by manipulating the ‘language’ you teach it to ‘think’ in. The lack of an ‘I’ precludes any self-critical process. In fact it cuts out any awareness of the symbolic process at all—which is the way we distinguish between reality and our expression of reality” (214). Instead of reaching for a computer analogy, Dr. T’mwarba confirms Rydra’s reasoning about the collapse of the symbolic process through a comparison with chimpanzees not being safe to drive, “They don’t have the symbolic process.

For them, red *is* stop, and green *is* go” (215). The figures used here—computers and chimpanzees—are neither human nor godlike, but they both indicate how Rydra and Dr. T’mwarba attempt to indicate that Babel-17 is unique in comparison to the languages that people speak. The way that the symbol for go and going as such become the same thing in the minds of the chimps is another way of describing how Rydra, in her moment of detecting Geoffrey Cord’s betrayal, feels aspects of the experience of language operating in unity, “both one now,” and how those very words act not like mediators between things and communicable concepts, but the things themselves (143).

Although the characters in *Babel-17* work hard to establish distance between Babel-17 and the languages they have grown up with by figuring Babel-17 as language for animals or machines, the same betrayals of intention that de Man describes in non-fictional languages happen with Babel-17, only even more literally. Rydra uses Babel-17 in order to perform astonishing feats of intuition and action, but unbeknownst to her, the language is programmed to turn her against herself. This betrayal manifests itself physically through nausea: “With the relaxation the sickness which she had put off for so long began to climb her body. ‘This whole thing makes me feel like I’m about to fly apart. You know when you doubt everything, mistrust all your feelings, I begin to think I’m not me anymore...’” (175). Rydra’s sickness operates through Delany’s language in much the same way her weapon-like words do in the passage when she attacks Geoffrey Cord; while previously her words hung outside her, here her sickness “[climbs] her body,” giving a sense that her own sickness might also be something outside of her, hanging from her. Earlier, Babel-17 brought a sense of coherence and simultaneity for Rydra but here, her use of the language not only makes her sick but also brings her sense of herself outside of herself. Although Rydra doesn’t know it yet, Babel-17 does work to make her “not

me;” it is in fact programmed to turn the speaker against herself. In the final section of the novel, Rydra explains how the language encourages this switch:

To start off with, the word for Alliance in Babel-17 translates literally into English as: one-who-has-invaded.... When thinking in Babel-17 it becomes perfectly logical to try and destroy your own ship and then blot out the fact with self-hypnosis so you won't discover what you're doing and try and stop yourself ... It 'programs' a self-contained schizoid personality into the mind of whoever learns it, reinforced by self-hypnosis...This 'personality' has the general desire to destroy the Alliance at any cost... (215-216)

Despite its tendency to reprogram its speaker into a sleeper agent for the other side, Babel-17 is perfectly rehabilitatable, Rydra assures the military presence in this room; she just needs to reprogram some of the vocabulary.

Rydra's supremely competent and confident explanation, however, skates quickly over a few interesting inconsistencies that reveal even more how Babel-17 is only as inhuman as all language for de Man. The most glaring inconsistency in Rydra's explanation, of course, is that a language that has no "I" or "you," and, according to her, no sense of self, could also produce something like a "personality," even one that betrays. After all, Babel-17 is not a language that is most readily compared with people; it is one that is described as analytical, like a computer. If Rydra were familiar with psychoanalysis, she might have called this compulsive, machinic, inhuman need to destroy one's own ship and crew the death drive. The death drive and its connection to *jouissance*, appropriately for Babel-17, marks a constitutive inhumanness of the human subject. As Lee Edelman asserts, "the sinthome refers to the mode of *jouissance* constitutive of the subject, which defines it no longer as subject of desire, but rather as subject of

the drive” (113). Although the *sinthome* is the point at which our investments and access to enjoyment are knit together and so determines our particular identity, that same point cathects us to our *jouissance*, which “evokes the death drive that always insists as the void in and of the subject, beyond its fantasy of self-realization, beyond the pleasure principle” (Edelman 25). In inducing the death drive, *jouissance* propels us to a moment of “passing beyond the limit of the human and dissolving into the drive that insists beyond the subject’s desire” (Edelman 81). In that sense, the death drive is the inhuman that simultaneously comprises and dissolves the human, just as language, according to de Man, provides a mode of definition for what makes people human while deforming that definition through its inhuman resistance to intention. Through the betrayals of Babel-17, we can see how subject formation and language both construct and undo the category of the human by simultaneously facilitating and unraveling meaning.

Although Babel-17 is repeatedly described as not only an inhuman but also an alien language, one not associated with selfhood, personality, or subjectivity but with machine-like analysis and computers, Delany indicates one obvious way that it behaves remarkably similarly to the English of his novel. When Rydra indicates that the language is programmed by their enemies to define what they call the Alliance as “one-who-has-invaded,” the purported self-awareness of the other English-speakers in the novel doesn’t help them recognize the ways their language has programmed them; in English, the word for the opposition to the Alliance, the people who created Babel-17, is “the Invaders.” The very qualities that turn Babel-17 into a machine for sabotage are already present in the English vocabulary; and indeed, rather than being diminished by an ability to distinguish between an “I” and a “you,” these qualities are only heightened by the ability to express self and other: Alliance and Invaders. By the end of the

novel, Rydra and the only other character who speaks Babel-17, the Butcher, have reprogrammed Babel-17 in order to rehabilitate the language to facilitate peace. Although Rydra never clarifies what exact tweaks she made to the language, one might assume that she redefined the terms “Alliance” and “Invaders” and added terms for “I” and “you.” “I” and “you,” however, introduce “mine” and “yours,” as in “my people” and “your people” or “my planet” and “your planet.” What Rydra seems unwilling to realize in her attempts to rehabilitate Babel-17 is the fundamental divisiveness of language. In order for there to be peace, Rydra might not want to rely on a system of signs that introduce distance between the speaker and listener, the referent and the signifier, or between the intention and the irony of signification produced by the mechanics of language.

Even before Rydra’s experience with Babel-17, her life was shaped by an encounter in which she discovered a discrepancy between what was said and what was meant. Dr. T’mwarba, in an attempt to cheer her up as a young child, bought her a myna bird, which he taught to greet her through a series of bribes involving earthworms. Because Rydra is telepathic, however, when she first encountered the bird, she was traumatized. Instead of being charmed by the bird’s ability to say, “Hello, Rydra, it’s a fine day and I’m happy,” Rydra heard “a rough combination of visual and olfactory sensations that translated loosely, There’s another earthworm coming” (156). She recounts the horrifying experience to her friend, the Butcher, the only other character to experience the effects of Babel-17 on a large scale, “I knew immediately [the myna bird] was lying. There was another earthworm coming, that I could see and smell, and it was this thick and five-sixths as long as I was tall. And I was supposed to eat it. I got a little hysterical. I never told my doctor, because I never could figure exactly what happened until now. But when I remember, I still get shaky” (156). Because the bird, as Rydra notes, “just repeats like a tape recorder,”

there's no coincidence between its intention and its words; since Rydra has access to the bird's intention, she has full knowledge of the gap between the goal of the bird—a delicious, wriggling treat, visualized to scale—and the words the bird says—"Hello, Rydra" (156). Although the myna bird is as organic as the chimpanzees Dr. T'mwarba uses to explain the lack of symbolic process, this discrepancy evokes how Babel-17 is described at the end of the novel. As a model for the way inhuman language works, the first analogy is mechanical: in the case of Babel-17 it is likened to a computer and here to a tape recorder. In a second attempt to explain how language works, an animal analogy is provided; in this case to a myna bird, and in the case of Babel-17 to a chimpanzee.

The characters' repeated attempts to distance the subversions or disturbances of language from its predictability and usefulness get further troubled, however, through Rydra's poetry. The novel uses this encounter with the worm and the myna bird as a formative experience that has henceforth shaped Rydra's greatest fear in regards to language, a fear that she will subsequently overcome in her triumph over and reprogramming of Babel-17. When Dr. T'mwarba realizes the parallels between Rydra's hysteria with regard to the myna bird and the catatonic state Babel-17 has left her in, his mind jumps to her early poetry: "A worm. *Somewhere in Eden now, a worm, a worm...*" (206). By introducing Eden, Rydra takes her experience of linguistic betrayal and makes a biblical allusion with a number of different layers; the most obvious one being that as Rydra saw a literal worm instead of a friendly greeting, ruining her experience with the myna bird, so Eve found the proverbial worm in her apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, ruining her experience in the garden of Eden. By bringing in Eden and, by extension, the apple and Eve, Rydra shifts the linguistic betrayal of the myna bird from the level of the mechanical and non-human to the level of the paradigmatically human, showing that perhaps this experience

with the lying myna bird and her subsequent experiences with *Babel-17* don't necessarily represent language behaving in an extraordinary way. Additionally, this shift from elements traditionally associated with science fiction (telepathy and alien languages that reprogram the personality of its speakers) to elements associated with literature (Biblical allusion and poetry) indicates that these issues related to linguistic effects are not just products of an alien, fictional language, but characteristics of language as such.

In order to highlight the ways *Babel-17* uses science fiction to highlight an aspect of language itself, I'd like to bring in a short passage from Lydia Davis's "Kafka Cooks Dinner." In this short story, Davis finds inspiration in Kafka's letters to his lover, Milena, and sometimes takes whole phrases or sentences from those letters to narrate the kinds of emotional turmoil he has experienced around preparing dinner for or dining with a love interest. Over the course of a few sentences in this story, Davis brings out the same key themes seen in *Babel-17*—from language as an alien betrayal to the figure of the worm as a material metaphor for this betrayal or disappointment: "I asked her please not to come to dinner, but then I asked her please not to listen to me but to come anyway. Our words are so often those of some alien, unknown being. I don't believe any speeches anymore. Even the most beautiful speech contains a worm" (516). Kafka begins by describing a high pressure situation with an object of his affection. As a result of this anxiety, he loses control of his words and sounds unlike himself; in fact, he sounds unlike any known human or creature. Although some might argue that Kafka uses this phrase, "some alien, unknown being," deliberately in order to distance himself from his own words, taken with *de Man* and *Babel-17*, a plausible reading suggests that once his words left his mouth, they assumed meanings that were entirely contradictory to the ones he intended. Similarly, Kafka evokes *de Man* and *Babel-17* when insisting that "even the most beautiful speech contains a

worm,” showing how lofty, seemingly unimpeachable words are riddled with obscenely material creatures who decompose and fertilize dirt.

The way that language produces a material excess, in both the example from “Kafka Cooks Dinner” above and that of Rydra using *Babel-17* against Geoffry Cord’s body, might return us to de Man’s examples from “The Concept of Irony.” For de Man, the unaccounted excess of language was its production of obscenity, in the form of an unintended insult in a fine compliment or a philosophical treatise that instead proved to be a description of sex. We can even see a glimmer of this obscenity in Kafka’s example. Although the language produces the embodied image of something with an unexpectedly spoiled interior, the example of language operating outside of its speaker’s control happens specifically when Kafka speaks to the object of his desire. For de Man, sex is the symptom of language’s betrayals; for Kafka, sex could be the cause of these betrayals. Although the scenes in *Babel-17* about language’s betrayals haven’t necessarily involved sex, close readings of the two unusual sex scenes in the novel will reveal what is unbecoming in this triangulation of language, sex, and betrayal.

“She was laughing like, as though, as if”: Sex and the failures of language

The worm inside the apple rears its ugly head in *Babel-17*’s introduction of Danil D. Appleby, the first character in the novel to experience a sex scene. The Biblical story doesn’t map so cleanly onto his situation, however. More frequently referred to as “the Customs Officer” than by his name, Danil D. Appleby seems to be a typical representation of a product of the establishment in this 1960s novel. He’s straight-laced, doesn’t break the rules, and is totally uncomfortable in the bohemian anti-establishment world of Transport into which Rydra plunges him. By the end of the novel, however, he’s had sex with a dead woman and gets a body

modification in the form of a tiny dragon that lives in a cage on his shoulder. Rydra, as the persuasive snake in this story, seduces him into the exciting, sexy, bohemian underbelly of this world, an experience that has as fundamental an effect on him as being expelled from Eden. Instead of being the apple in his name, however, he eats the fruit that leads to knowledge of an alternative way of being. Later in the novel, he even invites another character out to dinner in the bohemian sector, acting as an Eve who, once she's tasted the apple, is eager for others to share. Appropriately, almost immediately after Rydra introduces this naïve, rule-abiding Eve stand-in to the world of Transport, Danil has sex. The network between language and the apple, established through Rydra's traumatic experience with the mynah bird, here expands to include sex, echoing de Man's implicit suggestion that irony in language always brings obscenity to the fore(play).

The first scene in *Babel-17* that depicts a sexual encounter approaches the concept of sex very unconventionally. When Rydra gathers her crew, Danil D. Appleby accompanies her into a place called the discorporate sector in search of crew members. "Discorporate" characters are people who have died but are somehow able to exist and communicate with the living, albeit in a strange, limited way. As a first timer in this seedy underworld, the bureaucrat is unprepared for the ways that discorporate people sucker strangers; he meets a beautiful dead woman with whom he has an emotional and sexual connection, only to discover, after his afterglow dims, that she took money from him without his knowledge. His confusion throughout the encounter is understandable; because the woman is discorporate, the Customs Officer can't retain any specific details about her. The officer later goes on to discover that the discorporate woman has extracted a considerable sum from his wallet in exchange for this intimacy, but other than this concrete, monetary absence, he remembers very little from their encounter:

–recall from broken banks and color of earth breaking into clear pool water her eyes; the figure blinking her eyes and speaking.

He said: “An Officer, ma’am. A Customs Officer.”

Surprise at her witty return, at first hurt, then amusement following. He answered: “About ten years. How long have you been discorporate?”

And she moved closer to him, her hair holding the recalled odor of. And the sharp transparent features reminding him of. More words from her, now, making him laugh. (44)

Although the first word of their encounter is “recall,” it’s difficult to tell if we are in Danil’s fuzzy memories, attempting to recall and make sense of the experience, or if he is trying to recall an experience in order to categorize the discorporate woman’s eyes in the moment of their encounter. Indeed, the whole sequence is told from what must be Appleby’s perspective but through free indirect discourse, resulting in a third person “I.” The syntax is as jumbled and broken as the ripples in the pool of water that the first clause describes. Instead of containing a subject and a verb, the second half of the first sentence is a fragment. The discorporate woman’s presence fragments language so much that in their dialogue only Appleby’s responses remain, along with a sense of the amazement and attraction the Customs Officer feels. In the first sentence, the narrator or Appleby seems to be reaching toward metaphor in order to describe her eyes. But with that gesture, language breaks down, unable to form itself into recognizable sentences with clear subjects, verbs, and objects. We know, for example, that Appleby gets an impression of her eyes, hair, a voice, and “sharp transparent features.” Any attempt on the part of the Customs Officer to build an analogy in order to connect how she looks or makes him feel with his previous experience, however, only sustains itself long enough for the reader to know

how impossible the experience is to describe or retain. In the previous section, language out of the speaker's control resulted in a betrayal. Here, too, words escape and women betray, but the failure for either to endure a move into figurative language produces a sense of dreamy pleasure rather than shock or alienation.

The scene begins as one of flirtation and admiration, in which the woman clearly exists as an incitement to sex, but the scene can be interpreted as a sex scene because of the following passages:

Her ease infected him; and either she reached playfully to take his hand or he amazed himself by taking hers, and the apparition was real beneath his fingers with skin as smooth as.

... making him feel her near, nearer, nearing, and her banter made music, a phrase from.

“Well, yes, you're discorporate, so it doesn't matter. But—”

And her interruption was a word or a kiss or a frown or a smile, sending not humor through him now, but luminous amazement, fear, excitement; and the feel of her shape against his completely new. He fought to retain it, pattern of pressure and pressure, fading as the pressure itself faded. She was going away. She was laughing like, as though, as if. He stood, losing her laughter, replaced by whirled bewilderment in the tides of his consciousness fading— (44-45)

The opening line of this quotation, where they touch, marks a reversal of the experiences of the materiality of language mentioned in the previous section. Where language hangs outside of Rydra, here we know that Appleby retains the sensation of touching the discorporate woman's skin, but we don't know what she feels like or who touched whom first. The “either ... or”

confusion in that first sentence could easily be written off as the feeling of uncertainty and simultaneity in a spontaneous physical gesture of sexual attraction, but its recurrence and intensification in the final paragraph causes the earlier “either...or” to read more like deliberate confusion. When we read “And her interruption was a word or a kiss or a frown or a smile,” a kiss could be substituted for a smile, or even a word, if it was a kind word. But a frown seems directly opposed to a smile, such that we’re suddenly unsure of the whole character of the Customs Officer’s exchange with this disincorporate woman. Meaning is blurred to the extent that “frown” or “smile” lose any distinction from each other, but even in this lack of differentiation, there’s still a strange sense of fragmentation and discontinuity. The fragmentation is especially clear in the Customs Officer’s inability to connect this experience to any of his other experiences or sensory memories, but the sense of the jerkiness of discontinuity is also suggested in phrases such as “near, nearer, nearing.” The repetitions with a difference of versions of “near” suggest that the woman is getting nearer in a series of static frames rather than a continuous process. We can even see the “or”s in the last paragraph as designating breaks between frames: first a word, then a kiss, then a frown, as though the Customs Officer registers the scene through a series of unconnected sensory impressions.

In *Babel-17*, this sense of a fragmented encounter conveyed through language is not unique to the Customs Officer’s interaction with this particular disincorporate woman, so it’s difficult to immediately attribute this fragmentation of language to sex. Because disincorporate people are dead, this trouble with communication is not solely experienced by the Customs Officer; even Rydra, the novel’s talented linguist, has difficulty retaining the substance of what disincorporate people say. In order for Rydra to remember or use any of their information, she needs to translate it immediately into Basque, so her translation survives while her memory of

their speech fades. Although the Customs Officer's attempt at translation through figuration—"she was laughing like, as though, as if"—fails, Rydra's translation from discorporate language into another language retains the impressions that the Customs Officer's memory does not. Later in the novel, Dr. T'mwarba uses a little tape recorder-like device called a discorporaphone in order to translate what the discorporate members of Rydra's crew have to relate about her catatonia brought on by Babel-17. Why does Danil D. Appleby's attempt at translation fail where Rydra's translation succeeds? There are two crucial differences between these two attempts at communication: the inclusion of Rydra, who is not only a gifted linguist and poet but also a telepath, and the suggestion of sex in the communication between the Customs Officer and the discorporate woman. As de Man's subtext in the "Concept of Irony" suggests, the force with which irony disrupts language is frequently freighted with sex.

Language with sex works differently here from the betrayals of language discussed in the previous section, however. Rather than slowly transforming a splendid speech into a triumph of obscenity, language in this interaction with the discorporate woman breaks or blocks rather than transforms, as the Customs Officer's attempts to move into the space of metaphor continuously fail, either by fragmenting the syntax of the sentence or by cutting off a simile after the preposition poised to facilitate the comparison. But do the erotics of this encounter produce a blockage or does that blockage produces an erotics? As Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant agree in *Sex, Or the Unbearable*, sex, or at least the unbearability produced by sex in a relation of radical negativity, disorganizes and undoes the subject, allowing, as Edelman asserts, "momentary access to a sense of its radical unrepresentability" (65). The inability of Danil D. Appleby to retain any sort of translation of the encounter with the discorporate woman is not just a symptom of the woman's special science fiction qualities but more broadly a sense that he has

engaged with the negativity of sex's resistance to representation. In "Living with Negativity," Berlant and Edelman read closely a Lydia Davis short story that addresses the tabulations and accountings that ultimately reveal the unaccountable in sexual encounters. Both Edelman and Berlant agree that Davis's style produces a certain opacity in terms of what occurs outside the space of the narrator's cognition; Edelman notes "that consciousness tries to assert the reality of something beyond itself, that something is frequently less an encounter with an actual other person than the somatic registration of an affect by which such encounters are experienced," (76). And indeed, such a phenomenon amply describes the trace of Appleby's encounter with the disincorporate woman as represented through Delany's language. Unable to retain any memory of the disincorporate woman as an "actual other person," he is left only with a series of sensations and affects, a sense that he got what he paid for, even if he can't quite remember what he got.

We can see this phenomenon of representation of affects rather than external subjects in a different valence in a classic sexual encounter between Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze in *Lolita*. Humbert's obsessive figuration and refiguration of the conditions of possibility of their chance sexual encounter while Dolores sits on his lap singing a song shows how Humbert reaches for figurative language in order to fetishistically describe and conceal their sexual encounter. As Berlant defines it, "a fetish has the double function of not representing negativity (by being a consoling distraction from the encounter with lack) and of representing it (by proliferating representations that stand in for it). It offers and withholds cognitive control: the practice of acknowledgement plus disavowal phrased as 'I know, but ...'" (79). In some ways, metaphor and simile are perfect examples of a fetish translated into language; when we say my lady's eyes are like the sun, we are saying something like, "I know my lady's eyes are nothing like the sun, but the sun is actually a less cognitively terrifying, traumatic object than my lady's

eyes, so here we are.” The Carmen-barmen scene with Lola in Humbert’s lap is a masterful layering of disavowals, in which, like a magician, Humbert establishes all kinds of sleights of cognition for Lola, the reader, and himself. The first obvious layer of disavowal is the way Humbert “[diverts] the little maiden’s attention” with a “special spell” of the Carmen-barmen song (58, 59). The “nicely mechanical” quality of the song produces for the reader the “deliberately modulated enjoyment” of Humbert’s repetitive movements of increased friction and tension without any of the unseemly, too-explicit pneumatics (59). We know full well that the song tracks the mechanical, “automatic” nature of Humbert’s masturbation, but just the same, Humbert gives us, and Lola, the song as a more palatable object of attention (59). Humbert also redirects his own awareness of his erection by consistently figuring it as something else: “the hidden tumor of an unspeakable passion,” “my gagged, bursting beast” (59). Here, like the song, but in a way more directed to self-diversion rather than diversion of others, Humbert narrates his penis as something monstrous and other than himself, not as an object connected to him and more under his control than he would like to acknowledge (he could, for example, retreat to his Humbert cave to masturbate quietly alone, retaining only the memory of Lola, rather than her actual body, as a sex aid). Finally, Humbert never describes Lola as a whole character but as a series of impressions of goldennesses, arms, legs, and lips. She proliferates throughout the scene but only in intricately described bits and pieces. At one moment, Humbert reflects, “I lost myself in the pungent but healthy heat which like summer haze hung about little Haze,” merging Lola with the atmosphere of the room itself (59). Lola exists both as a substantial girl, nymphet, and source of limbs that give such sexual pleasure for Humbert and as something as insubstantial as “summer haze,” both doubling Lola and reducing her to the haziness inherent in her name. Even as the titular character of the novel, she exists most vividly for Humbert as an iteration of the ur-

nymphet of his youth. Although Humbert claims that he lost himself in this passage, the proliferation of “h”s might easily lead him back home; as someone whose very name insists on doubling, “H.H.” might find that this alliteration cements himself as a subject rather than disperses that sense of self (3).

Although Danil D. Appleby’s encounter with the discorporate woman and Humbert Humbert’s encounter with Dolores Haze are represented completely differently—one with a blockage of language and one with a proliferation of language—both portray the affective charge of the encounter as it is experienced by the male protagonist. In both cases, this portrayal or representation of a blockage to language or a fetishized distraction in response to sex produces the affect it describes, whether that thing is an atmosphere of dreamy confusion or chaotic, unbridled, masturbatory enjoyment. In representing sex, these texts also produce its affective register. While Humbert’s narration is riddled with instantiations of himself, from the first-person narration to the h’s of his initials, however, the scene in *Babel-17* is told from the perspective of free indirect discourse, creating a different relation to subjects through the third person “I.” Indeed, the pecuniary aspect of their encounter suggests a power dynamic between the Customs Officer and the discorporate woman, a structuring of the characters as subject and object, that the third person narration and these failures of figurative language complicate. Because the discorporate woman is dead and not quite there for alive people in the way that other alive people are, the sense of her as a person, a subject, or an object becomes less straightforward than it might be for more conventional characters. And ultimately, she uses this ambiguity to her advantage; the fact that the Customs Officer is unable to describe the woman allows her to manipulate his memory of the details of the event. Knowing that most of his memory of her and what they did will pop like a glossy soap bubble allows her to steal his wallet. The woman’s lack

of a discernible self or personality that Danil D. Appleby could describe afterwards does nothing to diminish the mutually advantageous nature of their encounter; in fact, her ineffability and ephemerality only enhance the affective charge of the encounter, which is all that Appleby retains. Language, knowledge, and objectification collide interestingly in this passage. Although the memory of the woman that the Customs Officer retains is not one of a well-rounded subject, since he can't remember her name or what she said or what she looks like, he is equally unable to assert power over her by being able to describe her and reduce her to a collection of hair, breasts, and legs. She continues to exist for him neither as a subject nor as an object but rather as a collection of sensory impressions and emotions and a manifest absence of cash.

This disincorporate woman's liminal status between or outside of subject and object contributes to her resilience even as she is erased from Appleby's memory of the sexual encounter and indeed the narrative itself. Thanks to the generic nature of *Babel-17*, science fiction allows the disincorporate woman to be both dead and physically present in the world of the novel at the same time. As Edelman and Berlant insist through their title, the act of sex is unbearable for the subject—an encounter with something that disorganizes the subject and threatens its sovereignty and coherence. But for an already dead subject, the nature of its coherence and sovereignty is already in question. When the disincorporate woman moves, seemingly effortlessly, from being the hazy, flirtatious object of Appleby's sexual encounter to the agent of the theft of his wallet, we might think of her non-subject subject position as something like Lacan's headless subject, described by Alenka Zupancic as a subject who “‘is realized,’ ‘objectified’ in this act: the subject passes over to the side of the object. The ethical subject is not a subject who wants this object but, rather, this object itself” (103-104). Lacan calls this headless subject, “the object of the drive,” and situates it “at the level of what [he has]

metaphorically called a headless subjectification, a subjectification without subject, a bone, a structure, an outline, which represents one side of the topology” (184). The discorporate woman’s resistance to simile, to being doubled through figurative language, supports this comparison: the headless subject is no longer split, which doesn’t make it whole, rather, as Zupancic suggests, it is “objectified” (103). She is a subject who is at the same time indifferent to sovereignty, and this indifference is what makes her inhuman. While the discorporate woman in *Babel-17* might not escape objectification of fetishization, instead of occupying the double position of Lola in *Lolita*, who is figured as insubstantial haze but is substantial enough to be trapped and carted around the country, the headless subject of the discorporate woman in *Babel-17* escapes the vicissitudes of the narrative and the page through these very failures and blockages of language.

“*what does my mind in yours look like?*”: Sex and the subject

While the previous section relied upon Berlant and Edelman’s jointly defined concept of sex and how it disorganizes subjects, this section begins with a disagreement between Edelman and Berlant to amplify the unbecoming potential in sex, using the extreme situation of a science fiction sex scene to show how the subject never quite works in the first place. Systems of meaning (of language, of intersubjectivity, of epistemology) continue to function because they operate under something like a fantasy of fiat lux: of a sense that people mean what they say, that there is no gap between signifier and signified. But what even the extraordinary science fiction language of *Babel-17* reveals is that this commonplace assumption that makes intersubjectivity work is fantasmatic. This fantasy of complete agreement between signified/signifier, intention/language, or even the possibility of intersubjective agreement, is highly seductive,

however; when writing about *Sex, or the Unbearable* in the previous section, for example, I read the text as producing a coherent, unified theory—“As Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant agree...” Although I attempted to generate agreement, Edelman and Berlant produced the text specifically to stage a scene of relationality that involves not just agreement but disagreement, misprision, and constant recalibration: a conversation where epistemology is produced (or undermined) through a constant mirroring and correction of what each interlocutor meant.

One of these disagreements, about their mutual friend, Eve Sedgwick, illustrates the differences in their perspectives on how a subject, or life itself, might “work” or not “work.” The disagreement begins when Edelman suggests that an affect particular to Sedgwick’s late writing that Berlant has been diagnosing as “dread” is actually linked less to affect than to epistemology, to “knowing”: “the dread here attaches less to the prospect of detachment from the world, less to the specific thought of her neither liking nor desiring it, than to the competence-humbling confrontation with not ‘knowing how’ to do so. An affective blockage gets processed as dread when its form is epistemological” (53). Berlant counters by suggesting that instead of epistemology taking precedence over affect, or a failure of affect getting processed as epistemology, Sedgwick is reacting to a blockage in both systems, a failure of both epistemological and affect management. She writes, “This is the conceptual rhetorical work of Eve’s late fictocriticism, as well as the motive for therapy. The crisis is of what to do when one’s long habit of doing the work of being oneself no longer works, not even in a fake or fantasmatic way” (54). But what Edelman has already established is that “one’s long habit of doing the work of being oneself” never actually works. When he writes about flourishing in the previous chapter, he argues,

I don't see "flourishing" as radically distinct from the experience of "lives that don't work"; negativity, in my view, speaks to the fact that life, in some sense, doesn't "work," is structurally inimical to happiness, stability, or regulated functioning, and that only the repetitive working through of what still doesn't work in the end—or works only until the radically non-relational erupts from within it once more—constitutes the condition in which something like flourishing could ever happen. (11)

For Berlant and Edelman, this discussion of their mutual friend reveals an important schism in their goals and perspectives. While Berlant still seeks to find ways of being that work, even if this working is necessarily outside of positive-sounding but ultimately destructive cycles of optimism and repair, Edelman remains more interested in the negativity that is not only constitutive of subjectivity, relationality, and attachment to the world but also undoes those very things or prevents them from working. We can even see this disagreement in the ways they pun on the word "work." For both of them, "to work" means "to function": does this subject or this life work or not? But for Berlant, "the work of being oneself" takes on the valence of practice that could be connected to a Foucauldian care of the self. For Edelman, the valence is more psychoanalytic, the "working through" of his earlier passage calling back to the Freudian concept.

Unbecoming is drawn from both paradigms, the Foucauldian history of sexuality and the psychoanalytically inflected concept of negativity. Indeed, affectively, I feel a deep pull in my diaphragm toward the right-ness of what Berlant writes. As someone who moved from her friends and then grew into her thirties for graduate school, I recognize—both on the register of knowing and the register of feeling—the experience Berlant describes, "when one's long habit of doing the work of being oneself no longer works." But as Edelman points out and this chapter's

focus on the negativity in language and sex attests, the “work of being oneself” only *ever* works in a “fake or fantasmatic way.” The structures put in place for the production of subjectivity—language, epistemology, relationality—all either reach toward a mastery that is fantasmatic or simultaneously act to undo that sense of self-cohesion. Indeed, the fantasy of a self that works is almost like Delany’s fiat lux of Babel-17: a fantasy of wholeness. Unbecoming, the central term of my dissertation, seeks out and amplifies the moments where this fantasy falls apart or where the sense of wholeness of the subject, language, or representation reveals its seams. As discussed in the previous two sections of this chapter, language, particularly the irony in language, is one place to find these fissures.

Sex, as the subject of Edelman and Berlant’s book and a central theme in this chapter, is another such seam. It presents a nexus of competing fantasies: according to some social metrics, it is supposed to stage connection, intimacy, and synchrony. But what Leo Bersani argues is that sex does precisely the opposite—instead of producing a moment of mutual understanding, it instead generates self-shattering. As Berlant points out, this is one of the contradictions inherent in the phrase “You make me feel safe”; in fact, as Berlant notes, that phrase more often means, ““there’s been an emotional compensation to neutralize how unsafe and close to the abject sex makes [me] feel”” (qtd. in Berlant and Edelman 13). Contemporary criticism of literature has found entertaining subjects of ridicule in the implausibility or outright badness of heterosexual white male sex writing—a smattering of recent take-downs include “Malfunctioning Sex Robot” for a 2019 review of John Updike’s work in *London Review of Books*; “The Naked and the Conflicted” from a 2009 *New York Times* article that is accompanied by infographics comparing sex scenes as written by Updike, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, and Saul Bellow to those written by Jonathan Franzen, Michael Chabon, David Foster Wallace, and David Eggers; and “A Little

Clitoris of Discernment’: Jonathan Franzen Can’t Write Sex” from a 2015 post on *Jezebel.com*, which pairs atrocious quotations from Franzen’s sex scenes with images of him discussing his own work for various interviews and book tours, looking embarrassingly self-congratulatory. Although I follow these feminists’ critiques insofar as I choose to focus on sex scenes that, even though they might be ostensibly heterosexual, are somehow queered—gender-swapped telepathic sex scenes or sex with dead people, for example—written by predominantly female or queer authors or authors of color, my project is less to adjudicate good sex writing versus bad sex writing, or even to prove how badly written heterosexual sex scenes might illustrate sexism, and more to show how something like “good sex writing” might be a contradiction in terms. Since representations of sex bring about failures, and subsequently reveal the fault lines, in our fantasies about sex, language, and the subject, “good sex writing,” regardless of the identity of the author, might never be able to depict mutuality and respect in sex without also emphasizing self-shattering and disorganization.

The second sex scene I will consider in *Babel-17* illustrates both the pressures put on sex to stage an encounter that allows for relationality, synchrony, and self-knowledge and the breakdown of those aspirations. As in the encounter between Danil D. Appleby and the disincorporate woman, the science fiction genre of *Babel-17* allows for unconventional sex scenes; in this case, one in which Rydra telepathically enters the Butcher’s brain. Where the disincorporate woman’s deadness made her difficult to pin down definitively as a recognizable subject or object, in this scene, the disintegration of the idea of a coherent subject or object is compounded by the Butcher’s language, which Rydra discovers is Babel-17, the language that prevented the Butcher from conceptualizing himself as an “I” or others as “you” and is responsible for the sabotage attacks. When in the Butcher’s mind, Rydra discovers not only this linguistic

explanation but also the progression of the Butcher's history since he was programmed by Babel-17:

Watching him function and react in these situations, her mind shook inside his, curving to his pain or pleasure, strange emotions because they were egoless and inarticulate, magic, seductive, mythical. *Butcher—*

She managed to interrupt the headlong circling.

—if you understood Babel-17 all along, her questions hurled in her own storming brain, why did you only use it gratuitously for yourself, an evening of gambling, a bank robbery, when a day later you would lose everything and make no attempt to keep things for yourself?

What “self”? There was no “I.”

She had entered him in some bewildering reversed sexuality. Enclosing her, he was in agony. *The light—you make! You make!* his crying in terror. (181)

In this passage, sex, self, and language come together through the Butcher and Rydra's mutual understanding of Babel-17. Although language functions more conventionally here than in the earlier encounter between Danil D. Appleby and the disincorporate woman, the same idea of obscene excess that we can see in de Man's description of words acting against intention is present here in a different form. Rydra notices something gratuitous about all of the Butcher's actions without a sense of self, even though Babel-17 allowed him perfectly efficient, analytical mastery; neither indulging in gambling and crime nor losing the proceeds from those indulgences means anything for the Butcher. Like the excessive, obscene charge that language produces through its inhuman arbitrariness, the Butcher's actions are motiveless crimes without meaning; or rather, the meaning that someone might interpret from those crimes is disconnected from the

intention of their perpetrator. Although Babel-17 is unique in the sense that it prohibits a sense of self through the absence of personal pronouns, it operates much like de Man's irony, producing a vertiginous drop away from controllable meaning making. Babel-17 simultaneously produces an excess of meaning, through its analytical potential, but a paucity of intention, through its prohibition of a sense of self or subject. Just as de Man attributes the lack of humanness in language to its arbitrary ability to escape the intentions of its speaker, here the lack of a sense of self in the speaker in Babel-17 renders that speaker somehow different from human: "magic," "mythical."

The Butcher's lack of self is erotic for Rydra. Just as the Butcher's "egoless and inarticulate" emotions are seductive to Rydra, so is her telepathic insertion into his brain for the Butcher. In the previous sex scene, the disincorporate woman complicated any interpretation of her as a straightforward subject or object because of her ephemerality. Here, the lack of a subject status also lends a seductive quality to the encounter. As Leo Bersani suggests, Freud reluctantly formulates sexuality as "a shattering of the psychic structures ... that are the precondition for the very establishment of a relation to others" (24). Both the self-shattering aspect of sex and its non-relational quality can be seen in Babel-17, which defeats both the sense of a self and a formulation of intersubjectivity in its lack of an "I" or a "you." Although the self-shattering quality of sex is not limited to gay male sex, Bersani emphasizes the role that anal sex, fatally literalized during the AIDS epidemic, plays in this self- and intersubjectivity-shattering moment by claiming that "if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal ... of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death" (29). Although, according to Freud's somewhat normalizing project of determining a healthy organism's baseline, the self-shattering in sex is experienced by everyone, Bersani's reading celebrates sex's potential for

queering masculinist norms of subjectivity and mastery. And indeed, Rydra and the Butcher's strange sexual encounter troubles masculinity by reversing their gendered positions; "in some bewildering reversed sexuality," Rydra has entered the Butcher (181). In this act of science fiction pegging, female Rydra penetrates male Butcher. *Babel-17* and Rydra's telepathy queers their ostensibly heterosexual sex.

This queered sex scene also highlights an aspect of Bersani's reading of sex largely missing from the encounter between the Customs Officer and the disincorporate woman earlier in the novel. Bersani insists that sex exceeds the limits of pleasure: "Freud keeps returning to a line of speculation in which the opposition between pleasure and pain becomes irrelevant, in which the sexual emerges as the jouissance of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is 'pressed' beyond a certain threshold of endurance. Sexuality ... may be a tautology for masochism" (24). In order for self-shattering to occur, the pleasure of sex needs to pass into a place where there is no distinction between pleasure and pain, a place at the limits of both the sensory capacity of the organism and the capacity of the organism to recognize itself as unique and distinct from other organisms. In *Babel-17*, the Butcher reacts painfully to "the light" Rydra makes, and their bewildering mind sex is most clearly inflected with the intensity of painful ecstasy; pleasurable pain is the key feeling associated with their sex in this scene. Reliving the Butcher's violent past, for example, brings pain to peaceful, empathetic Rydra, while Rydra's brightness in Butcher's mind causes him terror and agony. In another moment that operates as a sort of parodic reversal of conventional heterosexual sex, the Butcher even cries out to Rydra, "*You are so big inside me I will break*" (181).

Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, a postmodern novel that intertwines the narratives of several Filipino characters, also presents sex as a mechanism for forgetting the self. When Joey Sands, one of the narrators in the novel and a gay hustler, describes his first sexual encounter with a female prostitute, he is only able to enjoy the experience by losing sight of himself and the sex worker:

The woman never spoke, grunting occasionally and shifting my body on top of her with rough hands. With my bald head, I felt ludicrous and smaller than ever, poised on top of the ox-woman's hefty body. I rode her as I would a horse or a carabo. In the dusty light, her flesh quivered, covered by a film of sweat. I shut my eyes, imagining her giving in to my earnest, awkward thrusts. She may or may not have actually moaned, but I heard what I wanted to hear. Then I forgot about my bald head, my skinny body. The pleasure I suddenly felt was extreme and overwhelming. I came quickly. (Hagedorn 44)

The overwhelming nature of Joey's orgasm leads him to forget his embarrassment, vanity, and loss of dignity. In order to come, Joey first imagines the woman as an animal—an ox, horse, or carabo—rather than a human subject, until finally he imagines her pleasure. As in the scene between Rydra and the Butcher, Joey Sands losing his virginity also queers the heterosexual relation by figuring the female prostitute as the party in control of the sex act. Her rough hands, heavy body, and the way she mechanically shifts Joey during sex presents an unconventional figure of femininity in this couple. Joey is only described as coming after he forgets himself and is overwhelmed by the experience.

Although Joey needs the prostitute in order to have sex, his fantasy of her pleasure at his “earnest, awkward thrusts” almost eliminates her presence entirely; rather than having sex with her, Joey is having sex with his fantasy of her enjoyment. In another passage later in the novel,

Joey narrates how he uses this fantasy screen to have sex with unattractive clients. First he describes his physical repulsion for German film director, Rainer, whom we take to be Rainer Fassbinder:

He's around forty, who knows. Pale and flabby, baggy clothes, a drooping mustache and the smell of cigarettes, straggly reddish-blond hair. I'm not sure I can bear to see him naked. It's one thing if he was just an old man. I'd expect to see his flesh hang loose like an elephant; I'd be prepared. That's when I imagine I'm in my movie. I'm the strong young animal—I'm the panther. Or else I'm the statue of a magnificent young god in a beautiful garden. The old man with elephant skin drools. Maybe he's God the Father, lost in paradise. He can't get over how perfect I am; he can't get over the perfection of his own creation. He falls in love with me. They always do. I'll admit, I can get off with some old man that way. I need my own movies, with their flexible endings. Otherwise, it's just shit. Most sex is charity, on my part. I'd rather dance alone. (Hagedorn 132)

In response to this anticipated sex with a director, Joey writes his own script. Although the structures of colonial and socioeconomic power in the Philippines render him relatively powerless, Joey's narratives cast him as a predator hunting down a slow, dim-witted beast of prey or a male Pygmalion so beautiful he reverses the power dynamics of the creator-creation relationship; he becomes impossible to "get over." Although these two scenes from *Dogeaters* are on the surface acts of relationality, Joey's sex is insistently non-relational; he'd "rather dance alone" with his "own movies" for company.

Sally Robinson suggests that "postmodern American fiction has challenged ideas about gender and sexuality by interrogating the narratives that script us as masculine or feminine," and claims that "this way of thinking about identity signals a loss of faith in existence or even the

possibility of a self-knowing, unified, autonomous self” (97). Bersani’s theories of sex bear out these suggestions, taking further the notion that postmodernism decenters these narratives by insisting in addition that sex itself disorganizes the subject, emphasizing the masochism that is inherent to sex as experienced by all genders and sexualities. Indeed, the scenes from *Dogeaters* support Robinson’s and Bersani’s conclusions, troubling straightforward gender scripts and presenting sex as self-shattering. Even Joey’s insistence on projecting the screen of his own fantasy onto his sexual encounters presents sex as something experienced by one subject rather than between two subjects, as Bersani’s self-shattering suggests. In this sex scene between the Butcher and Rydra, however, despite the obvious queered gender dynamics and self-shattering, the manipulation and disorganization of the self through sex is more complicated than “[dancing] alone,” as Joey Sands might put it. In the case of both of the protagonists, this sex act marks a moment not just of self-shattering but of an attempt to understand one’s own or the other’s subject formation, even if those attempts are continually frustrated by the text.

For example, when Rydra first enters the Butcher’s brain for more information about the sabotage she experienced, this move into his mind violently reminds her of a barroom brawl and evokes a shocking reversal of Lacan’s mirror stage. Rydra recalls the memory with the sudden, non-volitional force of Proust eating a madeleine dipped in tea, “She had caught a punch in the jaw and staggered back, shocked and turning, just as somebody pulled the bar mirror from behind the counter and flung it at her. Her own terrified face had come screaming toward her, smashed over her outstretched hand. As she started at the Butcher’s face, through pain and Babel-17, it happened all over—” (175). This violent image both splits and doubles Rydra through her memory of the mirror and her identification with the Butcher. In the mirror stage, a fundamental phase of development during which a child recognizes its own image in the mirror,

Jacques Lacan describes the *méconnaissance* that occurs when a child sees an image of itself and identifies with the version of itself in the mirror as coherent, whole, and possessed of enough mastery to hold itself upright without supports. This identification with its image, however, is a misidentification, because the reflection that appears coherent and self-supporting is a misrepresentation of the human child, who still needs a caregiver to feed it and some sort of external device to hold itself up. The subject who sees the image needs this object in the mirror in order to constitute itself as whole, so this scene is simultaneously one of subject constitution and identification with oneself as an object. The moment in *Babel-17* where Rydra remembers the mirror crashing down operates as a sort of weird, reverse mirror stage in which, instead of creating an image of her own mastery and coherence by seeing herself stand up unsupported, Rydra here sees herself crushed and attacked by her own image, which produces the pain and terror she sees in the image, as though she were inflicting violence on it in the same way the mirror itself was preparing to inflict violence on her. Instead of providing her with an image of coherence, the mirror shatters, revealing her body to herself as in bits and pieces. By jumping into the Butcher's brain, Rydra feels herself as the object of violence, even as she remembers a sequence of events that might constitute her as a subject.

As Rydra's image of herself is reflected but shattered, so too is the Butcher's unusual subject formation revealed and complicated through this sex scene. As we discover through Rydra's telepathy, by thinking with Babel-17, the Butcher has been programmed to fail to recognize a self. Subsequently, the absence of that self results in an inability to attribute meaning to anything that he does; as Rydra points out in the passage from this scene quoted earlier at length about the Butcher's seductive egolessness,⁶ the Butcher's actions are all strangely

⁶ Delany obviously felt this way as well. In an interview, he recounts, "The Butcher was, for me, primarily an object of desire. He was someone I wanted to possess; not someone I wanted to be—or indeed, thought I already was. I

motiveless without a sense of “I.” Lacan clarifies the interdependency of meaning and the subject through a stage in pre-subject formation where we can think of counting as punning on mattering:

before any formation of the subject, of a subject who thinks, who situates himself in it ... there is counting, things are counted, and in this counting he who counts is already included. It is only later that the subject has to recognize himself as such, recognize himself as he who counts. Remember the naïve failure of the simpleton’s delighted attempt to grasp the little fellow who declares—I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest, and me. But it is quite natural—first the three brothers, Paul, Ernest, and I are counted, and then there is I at the level at which I am to reflect the first I, that is to say, the I who counts. (20)

Although Lacan is speaking about literal counting, we can see his use of a few terms as punning on meaning and the mirror stage. Lacan uses the word *compter* for “to count,” which can, like its English translation, mean both “to count” as in to cycle through a series of numbers but also “to matter,” “to mean something.” The Butcher’s lack of a self results in a similar lack of mattering. Lacan’s formulation of the brother, where he both counts himself twice by including himself as one of his brothers, but fails to recognize himself as the “I who counts,” is evident in the example of the Butcher as well. We can see this simultaneous over- and under-valuation in Rydra and the Butcher’s conversation; Rydra asks “*why did you only use it gratuitously for yourself, an evening of gambling, a bank robbery, when a day later you would lose everything and make no attempt to keep things for yourself?*” only to have the Butcher respond that instead of an excess

wanted to rub up against him—like a large, dangerous teddy bear. Here and there I’d see aspects of him in the streets, or now and again glimpsed in the pages of other books. So I polished him up and put him in a novel, where he would be safe. Or where I would be safe from him—at least for a while” (*Silent Interviews* 201).

of self-love motivating his actions, he had no sense of self at all (181). Additionally, Lacan's choice of *réfléchir* in the last sentence evokes not only the lack of self-reflection that would result in counting oneself into the group of brothers but also of the reflecting of a mirror. The "little fellow" in the story is unable to recognize himself as both within and separate from the group of his brothers, as reflected in two places at once, a *je* and a *moi*, as the French text suggests. While the mirror stage provides, to a certain extent, the ability to write the subject onto the object, here when one is only counted, the little fellow sees himself only among objects rather than as a subject.

Both of these connections to stages of subject formation in relation to a sex scene indicate that more is going on in this telepathic sci-fi encounter than the destruction of gender scripts or even unadulterated masochistic self-shattering. Do both of these characters use this sex scene to enact a mode of describing their subject position as something other than a unified, coherent self and subject? In a way, Rydra tries to use the Butcher as her mirror; in a moment of pain during their telepathic sex, she asks, "*Butcher,...., what does my mind in yours look like?*" (181). While Rydra had previously thought of the moment of entering the Butcher's mind as a barroom mirror crashing onto her face, here Rydra wants the Butcher to be a mirror who gives her coherence. Just as Babel-17 both facilitates technical, analytic mastery but denies a sense of self, so Rydra's question to the Butcher marks an attempt to see herself outside of herself, to produce a sense of mastery that would only be possible were she not herself.

Rydra's attempts to establish mastery or control over her subjectivity or language during this scene, however, seem always doomed to the forces in language and sex that shatter the subject and escape control. It would be wrong to think of Babel-17 as a metaphor for sex, but we could think of both the language and the sex act as overlapping mechanisms that interact in this

scene. After the initial self-shattering interactions of pain and lack of distinction—"the criminal and the artistic consciousness meet in the same head with one language between them"—Rydra quickly tries to establish order in the Butcher's brain by giving him an "I" (182). This process, however, becomes immediately complicated when she tries to put her definitions into language:

She thought: I/Aye/Eye, the self, a sailor's *yes*, the organ of visual perception.

He began, *You*—

You/Ewe/Yew, the other self, a female sheep, the Celtic vegetative symbol for death.

(182, emphasis in the original)

Rydra makes an attempt to control language by teaching the Butcher how to think about subjects and objects/others. But as she attempts to do this, her words spool out of control, complicating and compounding her attempts to establish definitions. For example, although her definitions of "I/Aye/Eye" aren't explicitly contradictory, they show how language operates more wildly the more one tries to control and specify. The moment Rydra says "I," she hears in its echo at least two other words ("aye" and "eye") which could act as puns or substitutes—"a sailor's *yes*" evokes its own sort of shadow connotation through the cultural idea of sailor's sexual appetites, and that connotation carries over to the next definition of "eye," in which we can't help but think of "the organ of visual perception" as an organ of scopophilia, an erogenous zone. Even the act of positing "I" produces its opposite, as Fichte's dialectic of the self, summarized by de Man, points out: "From the moment language can thus posit the self, it can also, and it has to, posit the opposite, the negation of self" (173). Like de Man's philosophical treatise, Rydra's attempt to give the Butcher a definition for an "I" and a "you" quickly multiplies into obscenity, diffusing her intention into a series of arbitrary signifiers, each with their own battling connotations and denotations. Despite Rydra and the Butcher's attempts to use this telepathic sex scene as a way

to define, delimit, and understand their subjectivity or subject formation, they are continually thwarted. Sex not only shatters the self, as the reading of Bersani with the earlier moment in the sex scene makes clear, but it also seems to trouble any attempt to put the self as a coherent, distinct whole into language. Although Bersani seems to attribute this self-shattering quality of sex to a sort of intense, obscene, bodily function, something against subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and communication—"in which the very terms of communication are abolished"—language also operates like sex by shattering any attempt to preserve a stable meaning for "I" or "you" (25).

Sex and Representation: Imagining the Headless Subject

The previous sections of this chapter have been primarily concerned with the issue of sex in its representation or even unrepresentability in language: how depicting sex distorts language and how language can produce obscenity outside of the intentions of the speaker. In this final section, however, I turn to how language itself might enter into a scene of relationality with the reader or the speaker in order to return to the critique of fantasies of wholeness: the fantasies that we might mean what we say, that sex might produce connection or synchrony, or that we might ever know ourselves to be subjects that "work." In the first section of this chapter, when I introduced a passage from de Man's "The Concept of Irony," I observed that language produced an obscene surplus through irony, transforming philosophical discourse into vulgar come ons. But by looking more closely at the Schlegel essay that is a source for de Man's lecture, we can see that the obscenity might not be a surplus but rather a condition of the relation of a speaker to language itself. De Man attributes to Goethe, "Words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say" (181). Schlegel himself suggests, however, that there is "a

connection of some secret brotherhood among philosophical words that, like a host of spirits too soon aroused, bring everything into confusion in their writings and exert the invisible power of the World Spirit on even those who try to deny it” (260). While de Man attributes agency to words and indeed makes them the subject of his sentence, he considerably lessens the impact of Schlegel’s quotation. Indeed, reading the disorganizations caused by the spirited brotherhood of words alongside Edelman and Berlant’s loose definition of sex, we might see these processes as remarkably similar. In the encounter between words and the speaker, there is a disorganization and a reminder of the writer’s lack of sovereignty: the writer’s intended meaning is distorted by the words themselves, which veer out of the writer’s control and destabilize the writer’s sense of himself as a subject and words as placid, manipulable objects.

Edelman and Berlant set the parameters for what they write about as sex in terms of relationality, nonsovereignty, and “the encounter”: “this book attends to those moments when negativity disturbs the presumption of sovereignty by way of ‘an encounter,’ specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in a relation” (viii). Sex, for Edelman and Berlant, is a disorganizing encounter that destabilizes boundaries and identities. While Berlant and Edelman compile all sorts of non-normative and unusual encounters, most of these center around some sort of anthropomorphic representations: photographs of drawings of cartoon donkeys, short stories in which an affair is broken down into its monetary components, a precocious child and a crabby curator embarking on an internet romance via emoticons. Delany shifts the field of the relational by positing an encounter with language itself. In conversation with an interviewer about *Babel-17*, he states that the writer is always in a masochistic relation to language. Delany suggests, “a writer is usually someone who gets a masochistic enjoyment out of being enslaved to that particular house, [Nietzsche’s prison house of language]...I love the

specificity of English. I love to play with it. And I love the way it plays with me” (*Silent Interviews* 202). As in Schlegel’s quote, the status of subjects and objects become blurred when the speaking subject enters into language. The phenomenon is linguistic: in Delany’s sentences about loving language, first the writer is the subject of the sentence, the “I,” who then becomes the indirect object, the “me.” But the situation is also fundamentally sexual according to both Berlant and Edelman’s definition, in which the sovereign status of the I becomes so tenuous the subject turns to object, and in Delany’s comparison with masochism, which describes a sexual process in which the subject delights in losing control and sovereignty.

Of course, language as such cannot experience delight, nor can it fear the ravages of sovereignty that make sex or the encounter unbearable. It is an inhuman entity that moves seamlessly from the subject to the object position and back, and, like the discorporate woman, it is indifferent to sovereignty. We might think of language in this specific relation that Delany describes as comparable to the discorporate woman or the Butcher, as an unusual subject or even a headless subject. The figurative body of language provides an outlet, accessible to us, outside of science fiction that exceeds the limits of realistic human bodies bound by the pleasure principle: in other words, unbecoming.

While, according to de Man, there is no guarantee that language is in any way human, Delany insists that metaphor is a cyborg. In this metaphor for metaphor, Delany defines the trope as a logical structure that produces a surplus. He writes,

the tension between the logical, semantic structure and the psychological, poetic surplus is, I think, what produces the energy and vividness of the metaphor. The logic and the psychology in tension make for the cyborg view of the metaphor. The logic is the

technological aspect. The psychology is the organic aspect. The two feed back on each other—in the same gesture with which they open each other up (*Silent Interviews* 174).

To illustrate his point about metaphor, Delany uses a parenthetical joke about Edgar Allan Poe: “‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’ ‘Because Poe wrote on both’” (*Silent Interviews* 174). In some ways, what Delany is playing with in his definition of metaphor is a connection between grammar and connotation: that we can “write on” something as both a support or as a subject of inquiry—this metaphoric relation of similarity operates like a pun in the way we use the preposition “on.” But there’s another level of metaphor, according to Delany, that operates in the realm of chains of signifiers or switchpoints, which he refers to in a clarifying parenthetical: “‘Feathers, leather, wings, wood, stone, bone, beak, brass, eyes, handles, claws, drawers...’” (*Silent Interviews* 174). Writing desks are made of leather, which rhymes with feather; claws connects back in its inner vowel configuration to drawers, etc. Delany is in some ways defining metaphor against what de Man claims in “Concept of Irony,” where de Man suggests that metaphor is a structure that logically produces a sense of likeness from unlikeness. But the way Delany is describing it works more poetically in terms of the position of the word in relation to other signifiers in the English language. Delany’s definition of metaphor moves us away from sense and meaning (a writing desk is like a raven because they both have four limbs, they are both in dark colors, etc.) into the nonsense of irony: the way words might turn against us. For Delany, as he explicitly states, the pleasure in an effective metaphor is in irony, the way the words work a surplus magic beyond the logic of sameness and difference. When metaphors and word play are made, the words play with us as much as we play with them.

Throughout this chapter, a recurring concern has been the unreliability and betrayal of language, of language as a mediating force that either twists the intention of its speaker or

obscures the thing itself that language describes. To that extent, Babel-17 is an attempt by Delany to create a fantasy of a divine language, a fiat lux with no gap between signifier and signified, with the drawback that it prohibits the idea of individual subjects and perverts the speaker's intentions. But perhaps this conversation about sex could be the solution to this discomfort with mediation in language. By shifting the conversation around sex from a representational one to the idea of a disorganizing encounter with language itself, language performs something other than a purely mediating function. In Walter Benjamin's essay, "Task of the Translator," which inspired de Man to comment that language is inhuman, the possibilities for an unmediated, divine language are suggested:

Holderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language. There is, however, a stop. It is vouchsafed in Holy Writ alone, in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly, without any mediating sense, in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine, this text is unconditionally translatable. To be sure, such translation no longer serves the cause of the text, but rather works in the interest of languages. (262)

In effect, Benjamin writes that true language or divine language is not in fact about collapsing the gap between meaning and representation but about eliminating the connection of language to meaning altogether. For Delany, this does not indicate controlling language in order to represent, but rather surrendering to the play of language in order to derive a masochistic pleasure from that disorganizing relation.

All this is to say, while this chapter has been leaning on affectively negative language to describe the ways that unbecoming works, or works to undo working–diction such as “betrayal,” “failure,” and an opposition to optimism or repair–unbecoming isn’t necessarily distinct from delight or play. While de Man’s language that must betray and Edelman’s subject that never works, or only ever works in a fake or fantasmatic way, might seem unbearably depressing, Delany shows us that the unbecoming brought about by language can also be pleasurable. As Bersani makes clear through the infamous image, even though drawn from a homophobic and misogynistic fantasy, “of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman,” and through the ways that he suggests that in the self-shattering of sex beyond the pleasure principle, “the self is exuberantly discarded,” unbecoming brings together the unbearable or intolerable with the irresistibly ecstatic (18, 25). The unbecoming in language, sex, or the subject is, by definition, something we can neither strive for nor control. But just as it presents examples of betrayals and failures, that negativity also contains the potential for play, delight, ecstasy, pleasure, and even exuberance. This is not to make unbecoming hopeful, for hope would be too close to the optimism that inevitably betrays, even as it implies the opposite. Unbecoming is not a way of escaping or repairing the failures of language, sex, or the subject. Instead, as Djuna Barnes writes in *Nightwood*, “the unendurable is the beginning of the curve of joy” (125). Ending with Barnes, this dissertation seeks to trace and embrace the pleasurable incoherences of the subject falling apart.

Unbecoming Characters: Alternatives to Identification and Agency in Comics Form

“You can’t have art without resistance in the materials.”

William Morris

Unbecoming Form

Comics is an unbecoming medium.⁷ Despite the cultural capital that some recent, “literary” graphic novels, such as *Maus* and *Fun Home*, have accrued, comics has a history of being regarded as unserious “kid stuff” or classed with low cultural forms, such as pornography.⁸ In a comics anthology that aims to take on the promises and challenges of feminism in the first decade of the twenty-first century, *The Big Feminist BUT*, the editors write, “Similar to feminism, comics have pretty much always endured periods of being maligned and misunderstood... Yet while they have been infantilized and subject to unnecessary censure due to the perception that they are both childish entertainment as well as a corrupting influence on children, there is no denying that comics, as an art form, have arrived” (7-8). While many comics scholars and critics make cases for the literariness and academic value of comics, or, in the case of this anthology, their artistic and political potential, insisting that comics are for “grown ups,” this chapter seeks to capitalize upon comics’s bad reputation in order to bring out comics’s resistance to normative expectations of mature adulthood, sovereign subjectivity, and sexuality. In tandem with this disavowed childish and corrupting cultural status, comics also motivates a

7 Following comics scholars and cartoonists such as Hillary Chute, Scott McCloud, and Ivan Brunetti, I will refer to comics in both the singular and the plural, singular when it refers to the medium at large (like “film” or “the novel”) and plural when I am referring to multiple texts or volumes (like “films” or “novels”). I will also use the term “comic” to designate one text, such as a single issue of *Love and Rockets*.

8 In *Why Comics*, Hillary Chute provides an anecdote about the time Chris Ware, a renowned contemporary cartoonist, first encountered *Raw* magazine, edited by Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, and Françoise Mouly, art editor at the *New Yorker*: the comic “was in the back room of his hometown Omaha, Nebraska, comic-book shop, and he thought—or rather, hoped—it was pornography” (103).

formal unbecoming, where the hybrid elements of words, images, and panels create tension in comics grammar and where the possibilities for changes in perspective resist identification. This chapter seeks to amplify these unbecoming qualities of comics by reading comics works that specifically address unbecoming and queerness—comics with characters who break the fourth wall, whose bodies mutate as a result of an STD, or who identify themselves with monsters instead of humans. While my argument about the unbecoming form of comics could be read into other examples from the medium, I choose passages from Jaime Hernandez’s *Love and Rockets*, Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Emil Ferris’s *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, and Charles Burns’s *Black Hole* to highlight how each of these texts takes advantage of the particularities of comics to flicker characters between their legibility as people in a story and as ink and paper on a page. These comics produce a reading practice in which each potential source of signification—words, images, and a combination of these elements in panels or in sequence—is in tension with the others, showing a queerness at the level of form as well as content. Although American comics and fandom have been associated with a sexist, homophobic culture that promotes a fantasy of mastery in male, adolescent readers, my chapter sets out to demonstrate the queer potential of the medium.⁹

Part of the unbecoming quality of comics can be attributed to its hybridity, how it is a medium that is frequently but not always comprised of words and images. These words and

⁹ As Ramzi Fawaz points out in *The New Mutants* through the example of Steve Rogers, Captain America’s origin story, “As Rogers’s transformation from scrawny stripling to muscular powerhouse suggested, this particular image of ideal citizenship through scientific intervention was consistently coded as masculine and virile (not to mention white and heterosexual)” (8). Although Fawaz’s book is designed to disabuse readers of the assumption that the superhero remained the same after WWII—indeed, his thesis is that the mutants that appeared in comics in conjunction with the countercultural movements of the 60s and beyond challenged this nationalist, masculine, white, heterosexual ideal, there is still an association of a kind of toxic masculinity with comics, particularly in connection to certain online fandom communities and some attitudes at comics conventions and in comic book stores. At MICE (the Massachusetts Independent Comics Expo) in 2017, there was a structured conversation for vendors to discuss the #MeToo movement as it generated greater visibility for recognizing sexually abusive or harassing behavior at comics conventions.

images are frequently divided into panels that are arranged on a page. In the case of carefully designed print comics, these pages are crafted to be read in two-page spreads. While words and film are mediums that operate through an originary negativity—words derive meaning from their difference from other words and a narrative sequence in film develops story through the processes of the frame that excludes and the cut that divides—comics has an accretive quality that Art Spiegelman calls the “all-at-once-ness” of the comics page (qtd. in Chute, *Disaster Drawn* 86).¹⁰ In response to this quality of comics, film scholar Tom Gunning argues that “comics offer simultaneously two alternative regimes of reading: an overall one that grasps the page as a total design and a successive one that follows the order of individual frames one at a time” (qtd. in Chute, *Disaster Drawn* 86). Indeed, in addition to these two possible reading practices, we might add a third: the method that looks at the whole two-page spread. Comics scholar Hillary Chute further complicates Gunning’s two regime proposal by suggesting that reading comics is not as linear as he suggests. Although the sequential aspect of comics (sometimes referred to as “sequential art”) supports this idea of an orderly progression of frames the reader is intended to follow from left to right and top to bottom, in fact, the practice of reading comics can often be messier and less linear.¹¹ In *Why Comics?*, Chute provides an example of a page where panels can be read left to right and top to bottom but also diagonally down the page. The direction of reading is suggested both by the continuation of prose throughout the conventional reading direction and the use of dramatic spot blacks that might draw the reader’s eye down the page

¹⁰ According to Kaja Silverman, “cinematic coherence and plenitude emerge through multiple cuts and negations. Each image is defined through its differences from those that surround it syntagmatically and those it paradigmatically implies (‘this but not that’), as well as through its denial of any discourse but its own. Each positive cinematic assertion represents an imaginary conversion of a whole series of negative ones. This castrating coherence, this definition of a discursive position for the viewing subject which necessitates not only its loss of being, but the repudiation of alternative discourses, is one of the chief aims of the system of suture” (141).

¹¹ Of course, this is dependent on the language in which the comics are written. Japanese manga, for example, is read from what American audiences would perceive to be back to front, and right to left.

diagonally (Chute, *Why Comics?* 25-28). While film, for example, covers over the negativity and fragmentation of its production in order to generate the illusion of a seamless narrative, in comics, that fragmented, put-together quality—panels in linear or non-linear sequence arranged on a series of pages—is always on display and is in fact constitutive of the medium.

In response to these unique qualities of comics, some ascribe to comics its own grammar, while others prefer to read it in terms of linguistic or visual theory, separating out the ways the words operate from the ways the images operate.¹² One of the most compelling formulations, proposed by cartoonist Ivan Brunetti,¹³ is to think of the words and images that compose comics as not in harmony but in tension with each other. While comics might not seem to have the originary negativity of words or film, the negativity of comics inheres in the competition between the words and the images. Instead of illustration, the varied elements produce dissociation. Cartoonist and comics scholar Scott McCloud supports this theory, arguing that processing information happens at a different speed in pictures than in words: “pictures are *received* information. We need no formal education to ‘*get the message.*’ The message is *instantaneous*,” whereas “writing is *perceived* information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language” (49). While some scholars might quite rightly take issue with the suggestion that there is no ideological training involved in the

¹² Hannah Miodrag, for example, points out the various shortcomings of overvaluing images in comics or thinking of comics as a form of a writing in the introduction to *Comics and Language*, and advocates a return to the more rigorous theoretical language of semiotics for a formalist theory of comics (10). Thierry Groensteen, for another example, insists that comics be defined by their characteristic as images in sequence: “one must recognize the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics” (“The Impossible Definition” 128).

¹³ My awareness of this interpretation is drawn from taking a class with Ivan Brunetti, but it is corroborated by many other critics. Writing about nineteenth century Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer, for example, David Kunzle calls this tension between words and images “duel as well as duet” (23).

perception of images¹⁴, McCloud is right to notice that the speed and mode of absorbing images is different from that of absorbing text; there are certain perceptual shifts that comics readers must manage all the time. Indeed, for a reader unfamiliar with this juggling, reading comics or graphic novels can actually be alarming, vertiginous, and time-consuming. Chute observes that reading comics “can be a source of confusion” for her students unfamiliar with the medium (*Why Comics?* 21). For Chute and her students, however, this confusion is compelling: “Comics puts productive pressure on what ‘normal reading’ is—not because it is so easy, or immediate, but rather because paths of reading and different moments of time can compete as alternatives” (*Why Comics?* 28). Not only do the words and images tend to separate, but the degree of reader involvement in choosing pathways of panel sequences, reading the page first and then the individual panels, etc., leads to a nonlinear reading practice with no predetermined, seamless absorption of narrative. In this way, comics queers “normal” reading by thwarting—to use one of the definitions of “queer” offered up in Bechdel’s family dictionary in her graphic memoir *Fun Home*, “to spoil the effect or success of; to thwart, ruin; hence, to disconcert”—a reading practice that privileges one “correct” narrative teleology (57).

Given the resistance that comics poses to “normal reading” and the unsettling experience Chute’s students have reported when reading them for the first time, this unbecoming reading practice might be further developed in conjunction with abjection, a psychoanalytic phenomenon developed by Julia Kristeva. When language functions normally, Kristeva suggests, there is an assumed coextension or condensation, however arbitrary, “between sound image (on the side of word presentation) and visual image (on the side of thing presentation)” (52). This bears a resemblance to the ways I wrote about language operating according to Saussure’s theories in the

¹⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, for example, would argue that the ways we perceive images is not intuitive or innate but based on acculturation and ideology (38).

previous chapter, in which a gap exists between sound-image and concept-image. In order for language to function as a source of communication, however, there's simultaneously a connection, across the gap, between these two ideas in order to form a recognizable sign (Saussure 66). Saussure even finds images the most useful way to convey this phenomenon, writing the word "arbor" under an image of a tree (67). In an encounter with abjection, however, this linguistic connection between word and concept fails, resulting in the dissolution of that condensation; the sound image and the visual image no longer seem to coincide. If the previous chapter examined the fantasy of language operating like a *fiat lux*, in this chapter, through comics, I will consider what happens when the gap is deliberately widened or the equivalence shifted, when the visual image and the sound image can no longer be considered as coextensive, when the text, in effect, undoes itself. This vertiginous multiplication of meaning, which might lead to the impossibility of meaning, evokes de Man's theory of irony, which Lee Edelman titles "that queerest of rhetorical devices" for its disruption of narrative and sense-making (23). We might also think of comics as a medium of abjection, where the tension between images and text and the multiple pathways of reading disrupt the process of signification, undoing the possibility of one overarching narrative. Because the negativity in comics—its resistance to one dominant narrative—is openly articulated through its construction and its reading practice, comics is an ideal medium to explore intersections between queered reading practices, abject narrative forms, and unbecoming characters.

To demonstrate comics's unbecoming reading practice, I open with a close reading from *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir whose self-conscious "literariness" has been frequently remarked upon by critics and acts as a justification for the graphic memoir being studied and taught in

university settings.¹⁵ Although *Fun Home* might appear to be a poster child for the cultural redemption of “graphic novels,” I choose to read a raunchy, tongue-in-cheek sex scene from the graphic memoir in order to show the medium’s resistance to one dominant narrative or reading pathway.¹⁶ In this scene, the depth of detail included in the images and the richness of literary allusions require the reader to consider the images and text on a number of different perceptual and interpretive levels. In addition to mixing words and pictures, this page, which narrates the loss of Alison’s virginity, requires the reader to follow several different storylines: the narrative related to Alison meeting her first girlfriend in college and the narrative of Odysseus on the Island of the Cyclops (Bechdel 214). On the previous page, Bechdel also mentions Scylla and Charybdis, so the phenomenon of a gaping, vertiginous whirlpool associated with female genitals haunts this page as Alison moves closer to her girlfriend’s clitoris and vagina. When Bechdel writes in the caption, “I soon washed up, a bit stunned, on a new shore,” we understand that she’s using the story of Odysseus to narrate the experience of her sexual encounter¹⁷ (214). While the first panel on the page establishes this fairly straightforward constellation of ideas—Alison’s first sexual encounter is depicted in the image and then compared to Odysseus on The Island of the Cyclops in the words—other visual elements in the image drag the reader away from this pairing with superfluous, obsessive details. The “Lesbian Terrorist” shirt and “Keep Your God Off My Body” sign are fairly self-explanatory, but Bechdel still feels the need to contextualize them for us in an aside indicated through its own independent caption, building our understanding of

¹⁵ Chip Kidd, in his review, calls *Fun Home* “a rare, primal example of why graphic novels have taken over the conversation about American literature”; in the *New York Times* review, it is described as “Proustian” (qtd. in Chute *Why Comics?* 369).

¹⁶ More evidence for *Fun Home*’s literary and cultural ascendance: the graphic memoir was the first graphic narrative published by mainstream publisher Houghton Mifflin, the book was voted Time magazine’s #1 book of the year, and was eventually adapted into Tony Award-winning Broadway musical (Chute, *Why Comics?* 368-369, 349).

¹⁷ For this reading of *Fun Home*, I use “Bechdel” to designate Alison Bechdel the author and “Alison” to refer to Alison Bechdel the character.

Alison's new girlfriend, Joan: "(from a recent one-woman protest against some visiting Christians)" (214). In order to absorb the information from the first panel on this page, we need to shift between the development of Alison's first sexual relationship, the development of Joan as a character, and the parallels drawn between this sexual encounter and *The Odyssey*. Tonally, the page also shifts: the first caption establishes a grandiose comparison to a classic work of literature and borrows its dramatic language, but by the time we read the second panel, that comparison gets reused as a raunchy joke. By situating the heroics in the captions and the sex in the images, the absurdity but appropriateness of their simultaneous dysjunction and conjunction bubbles into comedy about acute performance anxiety.

Chute likens comics to poetry, and the way the reader is tasked with engaging competing meanings on this page specifically evokes the trope of metaphor (*Why Comics?* 23). While some might define metaphor as additive, a "process that...makes up one signifying unit out of at least two (sound and sight) components," I instead define metaphor through its negativity—a construction that reveals difference despite its insistence on similarity (Kristeva 52). After all, as I've established, the process of reading comics is simultaneously one based on synthesis (taking the disparate elements of comics and building a narrative from them) and tension (the elements of comics resist each other and subsequently produce differing interpretations). The first close-up panel between Alison and Joan, captioned, "In true heroic fashion, I moved toward the thing I feared," implies that Joan's vagina stands in for the Cyclops, "a 'being of colossal strength and ferocity, to whom the law of man and god meant nothing'" (214). This reading is supported by the sign in the background, where Joan's "Keep your God off my body" emphasizes, even indexes, her disregard for the laws of man and god (214). But the previous page's reference to Scylla and Charybdis, with the dangerous whirlpool that drowns sailors, throws the ease of the

analogy between Joan's vagina and the Cyclops into doubt. Is Joan's vagina the Cyclops or Charybdis? Or the Cyclops's cave? Or all three? Instead of taking two components, the text and the images, and making "one signifying unit," this page from *Fun Home* provides us with countless possibilities for signification, all swirling around queer female sexuality.

When I addressed metaphor in the previous chapter, I used the figure of the fetish to describe how metaphor can substitute a cognitively controllable thing—such as the Carmen-barmen song in *Lolita* or, in this case, *The Odyssey*—for a cognitively terrifying thing—such as Humbert's masturbation or Joan's genitals. In the case of *Lolita*, the reader never loses sight of what's actually happening in the story; in fact, the rhythmic cadences of the song illustrate Humbert's repetitive masturbatory movements almost more clearly than straightforward description might. In this example from *Fun Home*, however, references to *The Odyssey* are not cognitively controllable and the slyly illustrative quality of Nabokov's prose is replaced by an actual illustration of the sex scene unfolding before our eyes. In fact, this scene was considered so graphic that a group of Duke University students assigned to read *Fun Home* protested and refused to read it in 2015 (Chute, *Why Comics?* 104). The captions then, with their witty allusions to *The Odyssey*, could act as a skimpy fig leaf in order to direct our attention away from (but always also back to) the sex that's depicted. The floating text box in the center of the first panel even censors Joan's labia from our view. At the same time, however, Alison (or Bechdel) is obviously getting off on placing these two seemingly contradictory moments side by side. Even as the narration creates a wry joke and a distraction from the sexual encounter, it also provides a fantasy narration through which Alison (and Bechdel) can enjoy the experience. Even the distinctions between Alison as a character and Bechdel as a narrator/author break down in this close reading of the sequence. Since Alison and Joan are also depicted having sex while

reading *James and the Giant Peach*, it's not unlikely that college-aged Alison thought of *The Odyssey* during this specific sexual encounter. But since Bechdel repeatedly alludes to literary texts she hadn't read as a child as framing devices for working through her childhood memories, this allusion to *The Odyssey* could also be Bechdel's retrospective, tongue-in-cheek reflection on her first sexual encounter.

Bechdel's use of allusions and repeated motifs in *Fun Home* are techniques that mark her graphic memoir as worthy of scholarly attention. Indeed, her own life is so informed by literature that without allusions, the character of Alison wouldn't exist—the word practically composes her name! Accordingly, we could read this specific moment with *The Odyssey* as a fetishistic substitution that obscures not just sex, but also a concern about the status of comics as a legitimate literary medium. Alison's (and Bechdel's) relationship to literature and education, however, is hardly straightforward; that ambivalence manifests itself in the irony of this moment.¹⁸ At this point in the memoir, Alison is taking a class on James Joyce's *Ulysses* at her father's insistence. Taking literature classes has allowed her a closeness with her father that she's always craved but another avenue through which he can assert his demanding perfectionism and control. By revising the backbone of *Ulysses*, *The Odyssey*, into the dramatic “voiceover” track of her first sexual encounter, Bechdel is giving her father the finger even as she is pointing at the thing that brings them closer—their homosexuality (from the perspective of Bechdel) and their love of literature (from the perspective of Alison).

I open my chapter with this page from *Fun Home* in order to show how the visual and thematic density of this comic in particular, and comics in general, works against cohesion of

¹⁸ Bechdel never went to art school (Chute, *Why Comics?* 362). In a short strip about hearing Art Spiegelman speak at the Center for Cartoon Studies, Bechdel writes, “Punks. The school of life was my cartoon school. Cartooning was something you picked up, by observation” (“The Art of Comix”).

signification rather than toward it. Here, irony (in a de Manian sense) finds free play. While language both enables narrative and, through irony, undoes it, signification and narrative in comics are troubled not just by the language that we read in the captions and speech bubbles but also by the wealth of signifying potential in the visual images themselves. By reading left to right, top to bottom on the page but also swirling the eye around a Charybdean whirlpool, the page offers multiple possible narrative interpretations and even motivations for Bechdel's composition of her memory. The page boomerangs between the erudition of the literary allusions (layered through *The Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses*) and the sweetness and raunchiness of a first sexual encounter, graphically depicted. The negativity in comics—the contradiction between words and images and the reading pathways that might generate contradictory interpretations—counterintuitively produces a surplus of possible narratives. Thierry Groensteen embraces this excess as a “*medium-related pleasure*”: “the rhythmic organization in space and time of a multiplicity of small images. Comic art is the art of details” (“Why are Comics” 10). Comics, then, provides the perverse—Groensteen even calls it “fetishistic”—pleasure of being spoiled for choice (10). Despite *Fun Home*'s academic, literary, and popular respectability, then, the graphic memoir still offers unbecoming, comics-specific pleasures.

In spite of Groensteen's observation about comics' excessiveness and Bechdel's detailed visual style, iteration in comics necessitates something of a shorthand in its visual vocabulary. The variation in this visual vocabulary, its hybridity, and its resistance to heteronormative, masculinist conceptions of the body as autonomous, impermeable, and sovereign provide another avenue through which to explore comics's queer and unbecoming formal qualities. McCloud calls the smallest unit of visual communication in comics the “icon.” In *Understanding Comics*, he describes the way comics translates human faces into icons and suggests that words are the

most boiled-down, abstracted forms of icons that exist (28). Although McCloud's speech bubble implies speaking, in this short strip illustrating his point about icons as words, he's refiguring Saussure's concept and sound-image. But instead of thinking of the one as representative of the other, as in a sign, McCloud places them beside each other in a space of visual representation and along the spectrum of abstraction. By the final panel, the comic gets even weirder.

McCloud's comics avatar takes off his glasses to reveal there are no eyes underneath. As McCloud points out, comics grammar encourages us to read human faces in pictures that are "very much unlike any human face [we've] ever seen" (28). The first panel of the sequence presents us with two obvious types of eyes (the word and the image), but the final panel reveals a third type that's been there all along: the implied eyes behind McCloud's character's glasses.

McCloud's strip illustrates why he calls comics a "subtractive" medium: the reader adds what the artist leaves out by assuming there are eyes behind McCloud's glasses (85). We might be tempted, following these assumptions, to label comics as a normalizing medium; because of its dependence on legibility, comics encourages the reader to assume that these characters possess ideologically ableist "normal" human bodies—two eyes behind the glasses, two arms with two hands, and two legs with two feet outside of the frame of the panel borders. Comics scholar Ramzi Fawaz would argue against this normalizing, ableist interpretation. In his scholarship on American superheroes and superhero comics, Fawaz coins the term "fluxability" to describe how alterations in post-World War II superhero bodies challenge normative conceptions of what human, male bodies should look like and how they should act. Fawaz argues for the queerness of these comics bodies, suggesting that "unlike earlier depictions of the rigid male body struggling to secure its boundaries from perceived hostile forces, a new generation of superhero comics presented the unpredictable transformations of the male physique as a far more pleasurable and

liberating form of embodiment than traditional models of sex and gender could ever conceive” (10). I seek to deepen McCloud’s suggestive definition of the icon by reading it alongside Fawaz’s queer fluxability. Although the concept of the icon is essential to an understanding of a comics reading practice, McCloud’s definition provides an insufficient articulation of the complications of how iconicity works in the comics form.

The revelation of McCloud’s avatar’s eyeless state indexes the comics medium’s potential to demonstrate the articulation of its signifying practice. Earlier I suggested that comics, unlike other mediums, has less of an originary negativity than a visual abundance. This visual abundance, nevertheless, means that comics always appear to the reader in a state of being in bits and pieces, showing the fragmented panels that require interpretation in sequence, as a whole page, or through other possible reading pathways. The “all-at-once-ness” of comics negates the “coherence and plenitude” that is part of the affective experience of watching cinema (Silverman 141). McCloud’s meta gesture in the passage excerpted above, when his avatar announces himself as ink on paper, marks a flickering between cartoon characters as recognizable representations that stand in for human characters and the mere materiality of that representation—a flickering that is common to comics in its open articulation of the method of its production. Rodolphe Gasché describes what happens, according to de Man, when the materiality of language becomes visible in the text: “Because of its ultimate meaninglessness and its exorbitant situation, ... this irreducibly formal materiality functions as ‘a break or discontinuity’ at the heart ... of thought itself (*AI*, p. 79). It disarticulates what it effectuates” (73). McCloud’s eyeless icon, then, by revealing that what we take to be human in comics is merely a mutually accepted fiction, opens our eyes to the provisionality of human-ness in comics, the disarticulation of the phenomenon that we have previously taken it to mean. Even as

comics, through its visible self-fragmentation and tension between words and images, resists the seamlessness of narrative in cinema, there is still a signifying practice within comics that closes the gap between signifier and signified: the icon. Accordingly, we need to expand Groensteen's assessment that reading comics produces a "fetishistic" pleasure into a realization that reading comics is a fetishistic practice: we know perfectly well that these icons are not human, but we read them as people just the same (10). McCloud opens his chapter on icons with a discussion of René Magritte's famous "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" painting, "The Treachery of Images" (24). In the *mise-en-abyme* McCloud creates through this self-conscious comics reproduction of an already self-conscious painting, McCloud points to what Magritte's painting already reveals: instead of moving closer to the "thing itself," the use of words and pictures together produces more distance and dissonance, informing the viewer that they are *not* looking at the real thing, even as their familiarity with representation leads them to predicate it as a pipe. Even as comics has unbecoming potential to undo signification and produce multiple narrative pathways, then, there is still a formalized vocabulary of images that works toward legibility in comics.

Accordingly, I read McCloud's revelation that his character's face is "very much unlike any human face you've ever seen" as a meta gesture indicating something quotidian that happens in the visual language of comics through its very iconography. Comics always encourages readers to switch effortlessly between different types of visual languages, all the while assuming that these languages take place in the same shared space of reality. A three-panel sequence from Hernandez's *Love and Rockets*, for example, shows Maggie, one of the central characters of the comic, growing steadily angrier as she imitates her cruel and demanding aunt (349). Maggie's anger is communicated in the final panel through the thick, unruly text and impassioned lines of her speech-bubble and the sharp teeth and dragon-like tongue of her face. Although Maggie

morphs back into a more recognizably human character on the next page, and we might continue to read the comic as if nothing had happened, this strip shows how the iconic style of comics creates a constantly shifting baseline of reality across a sequence of panels. Fawaz cites the sequential aspect of comics as one of the qualities that enables fluxability, suggesting, about the post-WW II American superhero character, that

comic book creators began to underscore the serial visuality of comics—its use of sequential images unfolding across space to depict change over time—as a formal corollary to the superhero’s unstable anatomy. They experimented with the visual layout of sequential images to depict bodily flux as a visual effect of transition between panels on a page. What would appear as an ordinary human body in one panel might appear in the next as a body in flight, as invisible, aflame, shape-shifting, encased in metal, or altogether not there. (18)

With Fawaz, I argue that transitions between panels and the vocabulary of iconicity allow for a queered comics body that challenges the “seemingly invulnerable masculine body” that dominated pre-WWII superhero comics and continues to be aspirational for certain scripts of heteronormative masculinity (18). I expand Fawaz’s fluxability to encompass comics like *Love and Rockets*, which is certainly indebted to the superhero genre but is categorized more accurately as indie or “*auteur*” comics, the loose umbrella genre of the comics cited in this chapter (Chute, *Why Comics?* 16). Perhaps it is no accident that the queer potential of fluxability is exemplified in a sequence where Maggie mocks her aunt’s reaction to Maggie’s bisexuality. While the first two panels follow Hernandez’s typical pseudo-realist style, the third panel shows not only Maggie’s dragon face, but also the impact of Maggie’s tirade on her listeners, rendered only by two cartoonish pairs of boots with a requisite hole in the sole. Despite Maggie’s

unbecoming human and her listeners' becoming cartoon and the way this panel queerly saps the stability of the body, the representation still shifts back to Maggie's human face on the next page, the narrative continuing as if nothing radical had happened. Why does comics have such unbecoming potential to undo narrative coherence and challenge normative expectations of body sovereignty but also flicker back into legibility?

In order to understand these visual shifts between human and nonhuman and how they might support a conventional comics language rather than undoing the process of signification, we need to look beyond McCloud's definition of an "icon," which designates a vast spectrum of visual representation that includes the printed word. C.S. Peirce's distinctions between the icon, symbol, and index further delineate types of visual and symbolic language; W. J. T. Mitchell provides a useful gloss of these terms, focusing specifically on the icon:

The icon, as C.S. Peirce defines it, is any sign that "may represent its object mainly by its similarity," a definition that expands to include everything from diagrams to maps to algebraic equations to metaphors. For Peirce, the world of signs is fully described by the trio of icon, symbol, and index—signs, that is, by resemblance or analogy, by convention (words and other arbitrary signs), and by "causal" or "existential" connection (a trace that signals in cause; a pointing finger). (56)

In contrast to McCloud, Peirce helpfully separates sign-types into distinct categories. For the scene with Maggie above, the definitions of icon—a sign based on visual similarity—and symbol—a sign based in arbitrary, culturally established signification—are particularly useful. In this sequence, the styles of visual communication shift from iconic (Maggie and her friend represented through images that resemble reasonably realistic women) to symbolic (Maggie as a dragon that represents anger through the conventions that associate dragons with power and

destruction). Although the dragon provides an analogy for Maggie's anger, the relationship between dragons and anger is a symbolic one. Not only does comics require shifts in reading between perceiving images and perceiving text, but comics also mandates the reader to seamlessly integrate visual symbols and visual icons; the visual language itself contains further degrees of semiotic difference.

Recognizing these different types of images as representing shifts in how the images communicate is useful because of the long philosophical history behind the separation of images and words or paintings and poetry. While the unbecoming flicker between Maggie as a person and Maggie as a dragon might go unperceived by someone familiar with reading comics, this intermixture of modes of reading would have inspired disgust in one famous antagonist of comics *avant la lettre*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose seminal *Laocoön* insists that poetry and painting must remain separate. He associates poetry with time and narrative but painting with space and description. For Lessing, a composite image (one that incorporates different visual registers of communication) is not only inappropriate and aesthetically illegitimate, but also dangerous. The importance of keeping painting and poetry separate manifests itself in his discussion of mothers who have been corrupted by sculptures depicting gods entwined in serpents. According to myth, mothers of famous men such as Alexander the Great and Scipio dreamed of having sex with a serpent during their pregnancy (Lessing 14). Lessing blames painting, determining that "those honest mothers had feasted their eyes on the god [statues of gods such as Apollo or Mercury accompanied by serpents] during the day, and their confused dreams recalled the image of the reptile" (15). In *Iconology*, Mitchell suggests that these sculptures of gods show a mixture of visuals communicating iconic and symbolic representation. Mitchell diagnoses Lessing's prohibition against poetry and painting co-mingling as partly due to

an unexpressed phobia of maternity, adultery, and monstrosity: “the irrational, unconscious power of images, their ability to provoke ‘adulterous fancy,’ the imagining of improper, scandalous conjunctions—the union of human and divine figured as the copulation of woman and serpent” (109). Mitchell continues to explain why this myth of a mother dreaming of serpents, figured in statues and paintings, might hold so much fascination and repulsion for Lessing:

the figure of the beautiful statue with its emblematic serpent is, in itself, already an improper conjunction of genres in Lessing’s view. It combines a proper image (a beautiful statue representing a beautiful body) with an improper, arbitrary, emblematic figure. The serpent does not represent a serpent: it is an emblem of divinity, an ‘expression’ of that which cannot be naturally expressed by imagery. (109)

We can see a similar combination in the *Love and Rockets* sequence above: the proper image of Maggie morphs into the emblematic figure of a dragon. Like the snake in the women’s dreams, this dragon that has taken the place of Maggie’s head is not supposed to be read as a mythical creature but as visual shorthand for the intensity of Maggie’s anger. Lessing regards this intermingling with repulsion not just because of its obscenity, but because of the power he attributes specifically to images: “a profane, indecent fetish.... The adulteration of the arts, of the genres, is an incitement to the adulteration of every other domestic, political, and natural distinction, and it is an incitement peculiar to images, the ‘one effect’ they have that must be constrained by law” (Mitchell 109). For Lessing, according to Mitchell, images, but particularly these “improper,” perverse images that adulterate iconic representation with symbolic representation, attack the foundation of normative culture, which mandates clear separations between domestic and public, natural and unnatural, and human and animal. Lessing’s repulsed reaction to intermingling poetry and painting or icons and symbols is a symptom of the

queerness of comics already indicated in its fluxability. This anxiety about the power of images—and the queerness of comics—is reflected in the history of comics hysteria in the United States. In 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, inspired the Comics Magazine Association of America to implement the notoriously limiting “Comics Code” as a way of censoring what were deemed morally questionable images and themes, fearing comics’ potential to corrupt innocent minds (Chute, *Why Comics?* 12).

The unbecoming hybridization of comics can be seen not just in the way it mingles icons with symbols in its visual vocabulary, but also how it has historically attempted to straddle high- and lowbrow markets. While comics, specifically the graphic novel, is a medium with growing cultural capital, the rejection of the term “comics” in favor of “graphic novel” is just one example of the ways the lowbrow origins of this medium are palatably repackaged for the reading public.¹⁹ When Chute provides examples of discomfort certain cartoonists and comics writers have with the term “graphic novel,” she singles out an example from Neil Gaiman talking to his publisher about his renowned DC title, *The Sandman*. When his publisher condescends to correct him—“Oh, you don’t write *comics*, you write *graphic novels*”—Chute relates that Gaiman “felt uncomfortably...like a prostitute who has just been referred to as a ‘lady of the night’” (19, emphasis in the original). Again an anxiety around the cultural status of a hybrid medium results in an analogy about unruly female sexuality and a euphemistic attempt to cover that unbecoming taint with a veneer of gentility. The intensity of Lessing’s response to the composite image of the woman and the snake, however, is muted in contemporary dismissals of comics: they’re not dangerous; they’re just “kid stuff.” Of course, many comics are directed toward adults, especially

¹⁹ This repackaging can apply to academia as well. When I first proposed a course to the Experimental College at Tufts as “Comics: Theory and Practice,” I was encouraged to retit it, “Comics and Graphic Novels: Theory and Practice.”

comics of the pornographic variety or even comics such as *Fun Home* that contain graphic depictions of sex and intellectually challenging non-chronological narratives and complex allusions. But in *Why Comics?* Chute's continual insistence that comics are "for grown-ups" seems like protesting too much (21). Why would she need to defend the critical relevance of a medium so vehemently if it weren't a source of continual anxiety? In fact, in these attempts to distance the medium from the unliterary or the too "adult," "kid stuff" comes together with pornography, resulting in the uncomfortable pairing that Wertham both crusaded against and titillatingly suggested in his title, *Seduction of the Innocent*.

Rather than resisting comics's reputation for the childish or the corrupting, this chapter embraces comics's unbecoming reputation and formal qualities. The very tactics through which comics are made legible—panels arranged on a page, the combination of words and images, the icon and the symbol—work at the same time to undo meaning and produce more interpretive possibilities than one central narrative teleology. With Fawaz's concept of fluxability, I explore the queerness and mutability in comics character's bodies. Unlike Fawaz, however, I do not see fluxability as a way toward thinking of comics as a site of international, even cosmic, cosmopolitan politics or queer belonging (11). While Fawaz suggests that fluxability is a "mode of being," "a state of material and psychic *becoming* characterized by constant transition or change that consequently orients one toward cultivating skills for *negotiating* (rather than exploiting) multiple, contradictory identities and affiliations," I instead see the ways that fluxability and the other qualities of comics discussed above work against the stability of identity and affiliation, even in multiple and contradictory forms (emphasis in the original 11). Rather than privileging becoming, my chapter looks to the negativity of what is unbecoming in comics, reading texts that explore cuteness with queer preadolescent sexuality and abjection and

queerness with bodily mutation and teenage STDs. Accordingly, my next section challenges McCloud's widely accepted claim about how comics provokes identification in the reader by suggesting instead that the formal qualities in comics might be better read through the ambivalent power dynamics and affective modes employed by abjection and cuteness.

Against Identification

McCloud attributes the creation of subjectivity in comics to the icon, suggesting that comics has power because the pared down language of the icon fits with our internalized subjective images of ourselves, whereas more "realistic" images tend to distance us from characters, whom we read as others rather than as mirrors of ourselves (36). McCloud argues that "when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself" (36). The result of this identification, according to McCloud, is that "the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!" (36). I'm inclined to be dubious of this claim, particularly because comics has a long and uncomfortable history of producing racist caricatures that tap into a visual history of othering, even as they use the same pared down cartoon techniques McCloud attributes to subjective representation that leads to identification.²⁰ What's more, even as McCloud celebrates what he sees as comics's unique ability to draw the reader in, I follow the skepticism of feminist cinema scholars such as Kaja Silverman and Laura Mulvey about the value of identification, particularly since they argue that it can be a tool for heterosexual male domination and a false feeling of mastery. Against McCloud's suggestion that

²⁰ For a brief but comprehensive history of the critical conversation around comics and racial stereotyping, see Marc Singer's article "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race."

comics is a medium where readers are sucked into immediate states of identification, then, I propose instead to read comics characters through the lenses of abjection and cuteness, both of which provoke more a nuanced, complex mode of relation than simple identification and whose boomeranging attraction and repulsion best fit comics' unbecoming tendencies. By portraying unbecoming characters who flicker between representing human subjects to monsters to merely ink on a page, comics generates ambivalence rather than identification, cycling between the attraction and repulsion of abjection and the tender, too-closeness of cuteness. In cuteness and abjection, I find an alternative to the ways that identification can promote feelings of mastery, emphasizing the queerness of comics's resistance to the "invulnerable masculine body" or one dominant narrative teleology (Fawaz 18).

Regardless of whether McCloud's assertion about identification and icons is desirable, his claim is further complicated by comics like Hernandez's "WigWamBam, Pt 3" from *Love and Rockets*, which features varying degrees of realism used to depict different types of characters. By drawing adults and children in different styles, Hernandez creates a sense that the two sets of characters occupy two different perceptual worlds, even though they're figured holding hands in the same panel (460). We could read this technique first as simply another version of what McCloud calls "masking," where backgrounds are drawn in detailed perspective while characters are drawn in a less realistic style closer to a cartoon (43). What makes Hernandez's use of this approach more interesting in this issue of the "WigWamBam" story, however, is how it separates different types of characters from other types of characters, rather than characters from background. By using a specifically cartoon-y style to depict the children, Hernandez pays stylistic homage to funnies like *Peanuts* or *Nancy*, short gag strips featuring child protagonists drawn in a simple, expressive style. This style could suggest that the adults in

this comic perceive children as simpler versions of people, less nuanced and complicated. Alternatively, the difference in styles of realism could be read as a projection of the children's self-representation: like Calvin, of *Calvin and Hobbes*, the children are depicted in the style of the fantasy world of their adventures—the reader sees a representation of the children's fantasy narrative about their everyday lives.²¹

That last reading is complicated, however, by the issue of the reader's perspective. A sequence of panels from a few pages later in the comic makes the contrast between the two different styles of representation of characters very clear, but muddles any attempt to lay claim to a definitive interpretation of how we might think about subjects, objects, and identification through these styles. In this sequence of children discovering a sleeping man in their shed, the reader's perspective shifts in each panel (462). First, the scene from outside the shed is shown in an establishing shot, depicting the shed, part of the backyard, and the kids talking about opening the door to see a fight. Next, the perspective moves inside the shed, seen from the position of the sleeping man—this is what he would see if he were awake. Finally, we occupy the viewpoint of the kids, who are shocked to see not the fight they anticipated, but a bedraggled sleeping man. According to McCloud, the pared-down style in which the children are drawn should align us with them, in accordance with the subjective way we visualize ourselves; following this reading, the middle panel in this page would be an avatar panel of the children imagining how they look to others—informed by the “funnies” pages, these children picture themselves as the cartoon protagonists they follow in the newspaper. But the position of the reader relative to the frames

²¹ Bill Watterson, the creator of *Calvin and Hobbes*, produces a series of strips about his protagonist, Calvin, in which he is a detective in a hard-boiled noir or a daring adventurer in outer space. Both of these settings result in a strikingly different style from the day-to-day adventures of Calvin in the real world. When he's a detective, Watterson uses a heavily shadowed, high-contrast chiaroscuro lighting evoking film noir and American noir comics, and when Calvin is “Spaceman Spiff,” Watterson draws the backgrounds of the alien planets in meticulous detail, perhaps in a tribute to the extremely detailed backgrounds in adventure comics such as Hergé's *Tintin*.

complicates this logic. We are not seeing the children from their perspective as they look into a mirror or a pool of water; we see them first from an objective omniscient narrator's distance and then from the position of the sleeping man. Here, the medium of comics could allow a space for characters' internal self-images to be projected externally. Put under pressure through these shifts in perspective, however, the logic of McCloud's suggestion about identification and icons breaks down. Instead of sliding seamlessly into the skin of the most sketchily represented characters, we are jostled uncomfortably between a series of different possibilities for identification, self-representation, and subject position—do we identify with the grandmother on the first page of the comic, the sketchily-drawn kids, or the sleeping man whose point of view we briefly share? “WigWamBam, Pt 3” shows that comics can work against identification by producing an unbecoming where we are not permitted a single, fixed perspective with which to identify. Characters we might have identified with as human subjects are instead insistently figured as inked images in a fiction through their shifts in style.

Instead of McCloud's identification, comics's abject reading practice provokes a boomerang of attraction and repulsion. Comics characters' uneasy subject status evokes abjection's role in subject formation: “I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva 3). While abjecting is an act of bringing the subject into being through what one is not—pointing to one's feces, for example, and saying “I am not that,” it also requires abjecting a piece of oneself, which continually returns to threaten the sense of a subject's coherence and sovereignty. This phenomenon can also happen on a larger, social scale, in which certain persons are abjected from a community in order to shore up the cohesiveness of the group that abjects. The unbecoming in which comics characters appear as human subjects and then as merely ink on paper echoes this push-pull relationship of abjection; indeed, the ease

with which comics characters shift from one position to the other puts pressure on the status of sovereignty itself, as does the content of most of the comics examined here: children, female sexuality, and queerness.

In the first volume of the contemporary graphic novel²², *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, by Emil Ferris, these themes are even more prominent. Printed on paper that makes the narrative seem as if it has been scanned directly from a child's spiralbound notebook, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* is narrated (and by implication drawn) by the eleven-year-old protagonist, Karen, a queer, nerdy outcast whose love of horror comics leads her to imagine herself as a werewolf-detective. She even draws herself in that specific way: with a toothy under-bite and a trench coat and fedora. Karen's werewolf self-image provides a good example of another way that identification in comics is more complicated than McCloud suggests. Karen identifies so intensely with her older brother's horror comics that she fashions herself as one of their werewolf characters. In the original horror comics, however, these characters are drawn in deliberately creepy and grotesque styles, not as the pared-down icons that McCloud argues should incite a reader's identification. Although for the most part, Karen's version of the wolfman detective is drawn as cartoony and unthreatening, Karen's wolfman sometimes morphs into a terrifying monster that pays a stylistic debt to the horror comics that she reads and identifies with. Near the end of the first volume, the relationship between degrees of realism and identification becomes even more complicated when her brother Deeze realizes that she draws herself as a monster after reading her notebooks. He pushes Karen to see her reflection in a plate glass door and repeatedly asks her what she sees, insisting that she's a girl, "not Larry Talbot

²² Despite the pretentiousness of the term "graphic novel" and its rejection by many cartoonists, it seems the most appropriate term to describe *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* because Ferris's first volume is fictional, was initially published as a complete volume rather than a series of issues, and is book-length.

three quarters the way to being the fucking wolfman!”²³ In the splash page culmination of this discussion, Karen is drawn as a realistic, highly detailed portrait of a girl. But she resists Deeze’s characterization, intended to be empowering and humanizing, first by countering, “You’re the two-faced jerk!” and then by reasserting herself as the wolfman detective on the following page. Although the contrast between the way that she depicts herself in her wolfman detective persona—in a sketchy, pared-down, even cute style—and the way she draws her human face realistically might seem to support McCloud’s claim that icons represent the reader’s subjective, internalized self-image, her identification with the original horror comics complicates McCloud’s claim. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* shows that degrees of realism alone are insufficient to explain the complexities of identification.

The scene when Deeze insists on Karen’s humanness also marks the moment when she comes out to her brother, stammering that she likes girls. But that realization doesn’t happen precisely when she is forced to reveal “her true self,” nor should her self-depiction as a monster be read as a marker of internalized homophobia. Monsters are embraced by many characters in the graphic novel, and Karen’s wolfman self-image frequently comes off as cute rather than scary. By overlaying the cuteness of Karen’s cartoon wolfman detective with her abjected social position as a queer, poor, social outcast person of color, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* reveals how we might think of cuteness as abjection with a pastel veneer; both phenomena feature too-closeness, the squeamishly maternal, indecency and unbecoming, and the ambivalent push-pull of attraction and repulsion. What’s more, cuteness and abjection show how affective processes of identification with and libidinal attachment to fictional characters are both more complicated than McCloud suggests and not always as generative of mastery as Mulvey might argue.

²³ *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, like many comics, was published without page numbers.

Karen never draws herself as human except for that moment in the plate glass window. As mentioned earlier, however, being monstrous isn't something she's ashamed of. The novel opens with a sequence in which it's implied that she's masturbating or having an erotic dream—"I turned up the volume to hide what I was *doing* because...It would've completely sucked if...Mama had come in and found me doing it...But I started moaning real loud like Deeze when he used to have his 'boy's dreams.'" Each segment of text is accompanied by an image of atmospheric nighttime Chicago that brings us closer to Karen's bedroom, until finally we see Karen undergoing the change and becoming a werewolf. But as the narration that sets up this sequence implies, the change is a moment of painful ecstasy rather than tragic loss of humanity. As the sequence continues, however, the dream turns nightmarish: a mob of angry Chicagoans masses outside her room and prepares to destroy her. Karen wakes up and eventually crawls into her mother's bedroom, where her mother asks sleepily, "The villager dream again?" As she snuggles into her mother's arms, Karen thinks, "Even though I was awake I knew that the M.O.B. was really out there and that someday it would be curtains for me. *Not* that I'm afraid they'll *kill me, no*, what freaks me out is that one day they *could turn me into one of them*...M.O.B.=Mean, Ordinary & Boring." For Karen, the choice to identify and present herself as a monster is not one of self-hate but a libidinally freighted desire to distance herself from the cruel, normal people who surround her in school and on the Chicago streets. In contrast to this M.O.B., Karen deliberately fashions herself as abjected and even gets off on the idea of herself unbecoming human.

This moment echoes the previous chapter's theories of sex from Bersani, Edelman, and Berlant, particularly in the sense that this transformational experience is beyond the pleasure principle—under an image of her bones breaking and elongating into werewolf limbs

accompanied by onomatopoetic cracks, the caption reads, “even though it hurt, I felt happy and I threw back my head.” In some ways, however, Karen’s identification with a monster doesn’t so much shatter her as provide her with a way to conceptualize herself. In a reversal of the expected pattern of abjection, Karen defines herself against the M.O.B., using the rejection of what Karen’s hippie contemporaries called “the straight world” to organize her sense of herself. Because her wolfman identification is connected to how she conceptualizes her sexuality, that too is categorizing. Identifying herself as queer serves as an organizing principle, even as queerness is also a disruptive, disorganizing force. The formal elements of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, however, resist the straightforward, distinct classifications that allow Karen to categorize herself. On the page of her erotic transformation, temporality and space are confused through a lack of panel borders. Her breaking bones jut into the image of her nightgown getting ripped, and the final caption, “...and even though it hurt, I felt happy and I threw back my head...” could apply to the image in the upper righthand corner of the page, where Karen and the full moon are positioned in impossible, overlapping closeness. The ruled blue lines on the paper stand in for bottom panel borders of the upper right image and the central right caption, collapsing the distance between the images and the book they’re printed in. In this way, even though Karen’s self-depiction as a wolfman is a way of making sense of herself, these formal moments of unbecoming are nevertheless disorganizing, working against clean, intelligible boundaries between monster and human, word and picture, and page and printed image.

Race in addition to sexuality plays a part in how Karen imagines herself as a monster and an outsider but isn’t used consistently throughout the graphic novel. Her mother is “one half Irish from Appalachia and part American Indian from who-knows-where” and her dad is Mexican. Her family background certainly plays a part in how she thinks of herself, but she draws Deeze

and her mother as human characters. Her friend, Franklin, however, whom she draws as a sort of Frankenstein monster because of the scarring on his face, is Black and is revealed to be queered. In a sequence on the El Train, after learning of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's assassination, Franklin is rejected by a fellow African American man who shouts, "No, pops, this faggot ain't my brother...No one can convince me of that! Freaks and queers don't have any place near decent men and women that faggot ain't my brother!" Although a bum on the train urges him to reconsider, this bigoted man is clearly a member of the M.O.B., someone whose drive to be ordinary leads him to abject those who threaten that status. Later in the graphic novel, when riots break out in the West Side of Chicago in response to Dr. King's assassination, Karen identifies with the anger of the protestors and connects it to her monster movies: "I understand why they're frustrated down there! I get why Godzilla smashes Tokyo!" This anger is unbecoming both in relation to race, through the stereotype of the "angry black man" or "angry black woman," and in relation to gender, whose scripts discourage "unseemly" anger in women. In her identification with the anger of Godzilla, Karen's destructive anger harnesses the power of reverse discourse terms such as "queer" rather than "gay."²⁴ Karen's identification as a werewolf is a way of arming and empowering herself against the oppression she faces as a queer character of color.

As hinted by the parallel to masturbation in the opening scene, Karen's wolfman detective depiction is not just a matter of identification or resistance to harmful norms but also enjoyment. Instead of internalized homophobia, her wolfman self-image plays into her relationship with her former best friend Missy, who is also her crush. After expressing too much interest in the lesbian plot of a vampire movie, Missy is pressured by her mother to abandon

²⁴ As elaborated on in a pamphlet distributed during the AIDs epidemic entitled "Queers Read This": "But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer...Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him."

Karen for boys, pink, and other socially acceptable, feminine activities. At home, however, she still occasionally tunes into monster movies on TV, chatting with Karen over the phone as they watch together. Just as Karen imagines herself as the wolfman, so Missy imagines herself as “Countess Alucard,” a glamorous vampire. They even have Barbie dolls that they embellish to represent their respective characters: Missy’s with a black dress and painted-on bloody fangs, Karen’s covered in glue and rolled in dryer lint. In a stolen moment during Missy’s birthday party, Karen and Missy embrace in the stairwell. In the page turn between when they sneak away and when they embrace, Karen and Missy have transformed from little girl and tiny wolfman detective to vampy Countess Alucard and a full-sized werewolf. Fantasy and reality comingle as Missy’s actual dialogue comes from her monster avatar mouth: “The times when I’m with you are the only times when I’m...myself.” This moment echoes the mockheroic fantasy screen Bechdel uses to depict Alison’s sexual encounter with Joan. Instead of situating the graphic reality in the images, however, Ferris uses visuals to represent Karen’s fantasy. Both instances apply allusions to monstrosity to cognize the experience of queer female desire. But neither of these deployments of monstrosity convey a monstrous tone. In Bechdel’s example, the Scylla, Charybdis, and Polyphemus references create an ironic, humorous disjunction between the literary allusion and the graphic sex act. Here, despite Karen’s scary physique, Missy’s upturned nose and weak chin coupled with the dialogue and thought balloons generate sweetness and longing. Being a monster for Karen isn’t being something horrifying, it’s the tie to the couple that she fantasizes as comprising her and Missy’s romantic relationship.

One of the oddest results of Karen’s self-portrait as an eleven-year-old “Larry Talbot three quarters the way to being the fucking wolfman” is that her character design is really cute. Unless she’s drawing herself as a full-on werewolf, as she does in the sequence in the stairwell

with Missy, she's usually depicted at the scale of an eleven year old girl, with round, friendly, expressive cartoon eyes and not very threatening fangs jutting up from her lower lip. The addition of the trench coat and fedora makes the effect even less terrifying because it emphasizes her youth; although Karen is piecing together the mystery of how her upstairs neighbor, Anka Silverberg, died, she's hardly a hard-boiled gumshoe. As Sianne Ngai points out about cuteness in opposition to realism, "realist verisimilitude and formal precision tend to work against or even nullify cuteness, which becomes most pronounced in objects with simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or detail" (64). In other words, the epitome of drawn cute objects is the cartoon—a pared-down icon composed of simple, round shapes like circles for eyes. Supporting Ngai's assessment, other characters in *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* who are drawn more realistically counterintuitively appear scarier than Karen does despite her self-fashioned werewolf image. While McCloud suggests that the cartoon invites identification because of its similarity to what he calls our projected self-image, the similarity between the cartoon and Ngai's cuteness complicates that reading. For Ngai, cuteness implies a specific power dynamic between the cute object and the perceiver, where the powerlessness of the cute object, its vulnerability and potential to be deformed and damaged, enhances its cuteness and inspires in the perceiver an avid tenderness (3). Instead of identification, cuteness motivates a different desire for closeness, a possessive intimacy based on an impulse to shelter and provide care. Perversely, the greater the object's vulnerability, the more satisfying the experience of cuteness. In this way, the power dynamic of cuteness always remains on the side of the perceiver.

Cuteness provides a more nuanced and so perhaps more persuasive alternative to McCloud's assertion that comics, and especially more cartoony comics representations, provide a vehicle for identification because they reflect how we perceive ourselves internally. Part of the

tenderness a reader might feel toward Karen is not just because the narrative is told from her perspective or because her facial expressions borrow from the comics language of icons. There's something to her cute, little werewolf body that inspires what Ngai describes as cuteness's infectiousness: "the cute/irrelevant object's charm is powerful enough to be 'infectious,' to a point at which, in an act of automatic mimesis similar to that induced by film's sensational 'body genres' ... , the admirer of the cute puppy or baby often ends up unconsciously emulating that object's infantile qualities in the language of her aesthetic appraisal" (3). Sometimes, as the example of Karen and many other iconic characters suggests, cartoons act through the contagion of cuteness, evoking a sensational, bodily, or emotional response that induces a sense of closeness. Instead of "becoming" the cartoon character, as McCloud puts it, we are brought into a not entirely volitional relationship where our status as independent, sovereign subjects is threatened by the infection of cuteness's "bad mimesis" (Ngai 68). This infectiousness of cuteness might seem to belie cuteness's power dynamics elaborated above, where the perceiver enjoys the vulnerability of the cute object, by reversing that status and making the perceiver the victim of the cute object's manipulations. Not entirely, however. Ngai's use of the word "charm" recalls D.A. Miller's critique of Dickens's characters' charm: "The charm we allow to Dickens's characters ... is ultimately no more than the debt of gratitude we pay to their fixity for giving us, in contrast, our freedom. We condescend to praise these characters as 'inimitable' because they make manifest how safe we are from the possibility of actually imitating them" (*Novel* 208). When Karen and Missy take pleasure from shivering at scary movies, the possibility of their enjoyment comes from the relative safety of their cozy, sleepover surroundings; this same power dynamic operates in the cute object's "charm," which allows us to identify with the character's delicious vulnerability without suffering from the actual experience of it.

The “body genres” that Ngai uses to explain the mimetic effect of cuteness can also illuminate how Karen’s horror comics generate her intense, affective response. The term “body genres” was developed by Carol Clover and Linda Williams and comprises pornography, melodrama, and horror films. Williams opens her essay, “Film Bodies, Gender, Genre, and Excess,” by describing how she and her son enjoy watching “gross” movies (2-3). This grossness is clearly divided along lines of age, gender, and sexuality; her son finds slasher films magnetically appealing, while she prefers melodramatic “weepies.” What makes these films gross, Williams later elaborates, is their inclusion of scenes of sex, violence, and heightened emotion and the ways those scenes might provoke involuntary echoes in the bodies of the viewers: gasps, shudders, and tears. Although Williams might resist this comparison,²⁵ the markers of these genres—“the unseemly, ‘gratuitous’ presence of the sexually ecstatic woman, the tortured woman, the weeping woman—and the accompanying presence of the sexual fluids, the blood and the tears that flow from her body ...”—share many of the qualities of abjection, particularly in relation to femininity and fluids (5-6). Even their “especially low cultural status—which [has] seemed to exist as excesses to the system of even the popular genres” marks these genres as abject (Williams 4). Despite these unbecoming qualities that lead to dissolution of bodily control depicted in the films and echoed in the viewers, genres also work to consolidate identity. As Williams indicates through the “gender” in her title, the preferred genres of Williams and her son categorize them clearly as members of their target audiences: horror buff/adolescent boy, melodrama fan/middle-aged woman. Karen and Missy’s attachment to horror films reveals that queerness complicates the way these target audiences are gendered. But as my reading of the

²⁵ At the very end of her essay, Williams writes, “Finally, as I hope this most recent example of the melodrama of tears suggests, we maybe be wrong in our assumption that the bodies of spectators simply reproduce the sensations exhibited by bodies on the screen. Even those masochistic pleasure associated with the powerlessness of the ‘too late!’ are not absolutely abject” (12).

opening scene of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* shows, the ecstasy of Karen's fantasy of "unbecoming" into a monster simultaneously grounds her in a sense of herself.

Perhaps it's no accident that *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* draws so heavily from monster movies and the horror genre to describe the intensity of Karen's relationship to Missy, her nascent desires, and her eleven-year-old body. By bringing together the cuteness of Karen's cartoon wolfman detective and her abjected social position, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* reveals how cuteness and abjection actually share many of the same aesthetic markers but sometimes differ in the affective responses they provoke. This unbecoming proximity of seemingly unthreatening cuteness alongside unseemly, fascinating, and absolutely threatening abjection reproduces the uncomfortable closeness of "kid stuff" and pornography brought together in comics. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, then, queers cuteness, doing the work of revealing how this unbecoming kernel of abjection is at the core of something so little, vulnerable, and harmless. Some might argue that Ferris's graphic novel does the opposite, domesticating abjection by coating it in a more palatable exterior. But as in the very title, whose childish grammatical mistake begins with a formulaic school prompt but ends in excess of the prescribed number in the subject and verb, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* is caught in a battle between the domestication, organization, and coherence of the narrative and the unbecoming form that constantly threatens to undo that coherence.

Into the Vortex

Charles Burns's *Black Hole*, by depicting a group of Seattle teenagers plagued by a mysterious, possibly alien, sexually transmitted disease that causes unpredictable mutations in those who contract it, introduces a type of unbecoming in comics that has a visible impact on

characters' bodies. Infected teenagers shed skin, grow gills or second mouths, or even tentacles and tails as a result of having sex with other infected teenagers. The graphic novel follows four protagonists—Chris, Eliza, Keith, and Rob—whose lives and bodies change as a result of contracting the Bug. These experiences of unbecoming destabilize borders that delimit, define, and fabricate normative bodies; the Bug thwarts normative gender categories as well as the traditional limits of the human body. These mutations, by putting pressure on gender, also trouble any straightforward heterosexual desire.²⁶ The trope of mutation representing queerness is not a new one, especially not in comics, where *X-Men* is famous for employing “homo mutantis” as a metaphor for marginalized identities in conjunction with contemporary struggles for civil rights.²⁷ But this section returns to Fawaz’s term, fluxability, to investigate what happens when the mutant, queered body departs from the superhero genre. Burns’s horror-inspired indie comic provides an opportunity to see the negativity of fluxability. While Fawaz argues that fluxability generates a more inclusive cosmic and cosmopolitan politics and a sense of queer belonging, *Black Hole* shows that queered comics bodies, while attempting to produce alternative communities and relationships, instead result in uncontrollable unbecoming.

In addition to its alternative to superhero mutations, *Black Hole* is an admirable case study for unbecoming in comics because of its sex scenes. As established in my previous chapter, sex designates a fault line in the formation of the subject and indexes a moment when

26 Although many critics have interpreted this comic, specifically the “Bug,” as a response to AIDS, there are no openly gay characters in *Black Hole* (Chute, *Why Comics?* 151). By suggesting that the mutations from the “Bug” queer characters, I am not trying to doubly erase the impact the AIDS epidemic made on the gay community by inscribing queerness onto ostensibly straight characters. Instead, I am employing the term “queerness,” as I have in the rest of this chapter, to mean a disruptive, disorganizing force that thwarts normative conceptions of reading, signification, sovereignty, or sexuality.

27 An article from *The Advocate* titled, “Mutant is the New Gay,” opens with an anecdote describing how Bryan Singer, the director of the first X-men film, pitched the role of Magneto to Ian McKellen; he “argued that the X-Men—a persecuted minority of powerful mutants struggling to coexist with human society--were perfect stand-ins for the current struggles of LGBT people” (Vary).

attempts to generate connection or self-knowledge instead result in self-dissolution. Many of the previous examples in this chapter have depicted queer (female) sexuality or queer sex with a screen of fantasy. The “monstrous” fantasies of the previous sections are here the fabric of the graphic novel’s reality. *Black Hole*, because of its subject matter and because of its genre, allows me to read explicit sex scenes in order to bring together the queer pressure on the normative, sovereign superhero body that is fluxability with the self-shattering of sex. Combined with the tension in comics between words and images and comics’s “all-at-once-ness,” these unbecoming qualities coalesce in *Black Hole* to present examples of unbecoming at the level of form and content.

The most memorable mutated body—Eliza, who has grown a tail as a result of the Bug—in *Black Hole* also brings cuteness into play with fluxability. Eliza’s tail shows her by turns as phallically empowered, cutely disempowered, and abject. The tail, in its obviously phallic resonances, shows the queer potential of fluxability and its threat to the “seemingly invulnerable masculine body” by weakening the distinction between male and female bodies (Fawaz 18). Because the tail puts the stability of Eliza’s gender into question, it also puts pressure on the ostensibly heterosexual identities of the teenagers. A brief sequence showcasing her tail depicts the moments before her first sexual encounter with Keith, which begins as she leads Keith into her basement bedroom and studio. The panels show Eliza from Keith’s perspective, where the twitching and shifting of the bulge beneath her towel could inspire a litany of jokes about trouser snakes: “Is that a tail in your towel or are you just happy to see me?” Although Keith only admits to being interested in women, his straight desire is queered by his fascination with this tail. The caption transcribing his thoughts reads, “It was dark, but that didn’t stop me from getting a good

look at her from behind.”²⁸ Instead of commenting on her “nice ass” or shapely curves, however, Keith only has eyes for her tail: “I could see it, pressed up against the back of her towel... A long slender shape tucked over to the side. It looked like it was moving just a little bit...Twitching. I could feel myself getting hard...” Although I suggested earlier that images and text are in tension with each other, Eliza’s tail, rendered in a thick, accentuated shadow in the final close-up on the page, could be read as an illustration of this caption. This illustration of what Keith is feeling, rather than what he sees, nevertheless marks a deviation from Keith’s narrative control; it disrupts the narrative pattern of Keith’s thoughts being relayed in the captions while the images are determined by his point of view. If we read the final panel as illustrative instead, depicting what looks like it could be an engorged penis, it indicates Keith’s identification with Eliza. On the one hand, this identification could be seen as masculinist and empowering, since Keith is identifying with this strong, phallic image. But on the other hand, the fluxability of Eliza’s body puts Keith into a relationship of identification not with a male protagonist but with the female object. Fluxability and the possibilities for interpretation between the caption and image result in unbecoming, where the ruptured borders of Eliza’s body disrupt Keith’s bodily sovereignty and narrative coherence.

Eliza’s tail isn’t always figured as phallic, and indeed, when perceived as cute, it seems to reverse the possibilities for challenging Keith’s coherence and narrative control that were present in the previous scene. By the end of the graphic novel, Keith and Eliza have escaped to Monument Valley. In the first, establishing panel, Eliza is sitting naked, cross-legged and facing away from the viewer as she draws the canyon vista in front of her. Her hair is pulled into two girlish pigtails on the top of her head. In the following two panels, Keith remarks,

²⁸ *Black Hole*, like *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, also has no page numbers.

“Concentrating, all focused in on her sketchbook, but aw, God...Her tail. Her cute little tail moving slowly back and forth, making a fan shape in the dirt. She’s the one, she really is.” In contrast to Keith’s thoughts in their earlier pre-coital encounter, here his internal monologue takes on a folksy tone, employing clichés like “she’s the one” and practically thinking “aw, shucks.” In an effort to domesticate Eliza, to make her his heterosexual complement rather than a source of identification or a queerly troubling double, Keith needs to refigure her twitching tail as just a cute little tic. The power dynamics of cuteness mentioned in relation to *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* come into play here; because cuteness “[revolves] around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (Ngai 3). Sidestepping the dangers of getting turned on by her phallic appendage, Keith eroticizes Eliza’s tail safely by diminishing it to something “cute” and “little.” Where before the involuntary movement of her tail made Eliza seem unknown and dangerous, here Keith’s focus on its small, repetitive gesture belittles her by showing how her body is not under her control. By making Eliza small, childlike, and cute, Keith regains the power and sovereignty he lost in that first sexual encounter. The form of this page reflects this power shift. While previously, the relationship between Keith’s thoughts in the caption and Eliza’s tail in the image presented a disturbing synchrony and a confusion about whether the image depicted what Keith was seeing or what Keith was feeling at a bodily level, here the relationship between Keith’s thoughts and the image is clear. The perspective is directed by Keith’s vision and the captions relate what Keith thinks as he looks at Eliza and the vista, her tail, and her face as she turns back to him.

Although this cute, domestic scene might indicate that *Black Hole* concludes with a rosy-hued heterosexual future for Keith and Eliza, Eliza's mutation continues to haunt their happy ending and trouble Keith's control over his own narration. After cozying up to her in a motel bedroom and telling her, "I love you Eliza. I'll love you forever, no matter what," Keith thinks just before he falls asleep, "Her tail tucked between my legs. I feel it flutter...tremble a few times as she goes back to sleep. Her good smell. The scent of her rising up to me. Way up inside it gets huge and dark." While Keith makes a conscious effort to think of Eliza as cute and little, as he drifts off to sleep, his choice of words revises a sense of her as small, unthreatening, or even feminized. Any stable sense of gender expectations is undone by the way her tail is tucked between his legs as he senses her smell "rising." In the following panel, this conflation of the movement of the tail and the movement of the smell is marked by the ambiguity of the antecedent of "it." Although it ought to refer to her "smell," it gestures contextually to her tail as well. Instead of a cute fan shape as in the previous scene, which could be feminizing,²⁹ the association of hugeness and penetration suggested by Keith's thoughts renders the tail phallic again. Even as *Black Hole* seeks conventional narrative resolution through the romantic pairing of a male and a female protagonist, then, these characters' mutations queer clear distinctions between normative scripts of masculine and feminine, penetrator and penetrated. The contradictions of Eliza's tail—empowering but cute, phallic but objectifying—index both how easily cuteness slips into the space of abjection and how Keith's attempts to re-establish his sense of control over his sexuality, delimit his body, and direct the narrative are undermined by the fluxability of Eliza's body. As in abjection, where the thing that was abjected poses a constant threat to the subject, unbecoming here continues to undo Keith's sense of sovereignty.

²⁹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "fanny" is British slang for vagina.

While fluxability did more to threaten Keith's narrative control and masculinity than Eliza's own coherence in the case of Eliza's tail, another mutation experienced by a male character, Rob, shows the effect of mutations over the possessor's own sense of bodily autonomy. Rob's mutation manifests itself in the form of a second mouth at his collarbone. In this sequence, Rob has just had unprotected sex with Chris, who is narrating the scene through a flashback. While Keith was completely aware of Eliza's mutation, and in fact, as suggested in the sequence described earlier, her mutation incited him to have sex, Chris doesn't know that Rob is infected. Again, a sex scene is the site of characters' unbecoming. Although Chris reminisces in her caption, "God it happened so fast," the fact that it takes four panels to discover the second mouth gives a stuttering, slow motion quality to Chris's memory of the horrific revelation that would change her life. Not only is the moment horrifying for Chris because she discovers that she too might now be infected, Rob's second mouth is itself grotesque. Like Eliza's tail, the second mouth is both a part of him and not him, responding to his pleasures and anxieties but uncontrollable in its words and groans. Instead of manifesting itself as an external excess of his body, however, Rob's mouth opens onto his insides, making him more easily penetrable. This mutation is a material manifestation on Rob's body of the self-shattering sex act. Not only does Rob's STD result in an additional hole on his body, but his inability to control the noises made by this mouth serves as a constant reminder that he lacks agency over his body. When he comes, the second mouth parts and utters incomprehensible, inhuman noises. Chute suggests that this mouth is "unsocializable and uncontrollable"; here Rob's fluxability, the mutation found on his body, does not act to build community and belonging, as Fawaz might suggest, but instead points to the ways sex with fluxability leads to bodily incoherence and unbecoming (*Why Comics?* 150).

Just as the fluxability of Eliza and Rob's bodies result in the dissolution of their own or other's bodily coherence or agency, *Black Hole* employs other techniques specific to comics to show the permeability of these teenagers' bodies and identities. In particular, comics's "all-at-once-ness"—the way panels can be read in sequence or as composing a whole page—reveals how contingent masculinity, femininity, and bodily integrity are. The panels that show this phenomenon most clearly are also excerpted from Chris's flashback to the first time she had sex with Rob. The first sequence of panels highlights comics's difference from film in its "all-at-once-ness." Across these two panels, Rob and Chris are depicted in a sequence similar to short/reverse shot. Where these shots would be cut together in a film so that we'd only see one face and shoulder at a time, in this page of comics, however, the panels are arranged in sequence. Since their shoulders and hair form the foreground of these panels, at first glimpse, Rob and Chris appear to make two halves of the same person. Here, the "all-at-once-ness" of comics allows us to see abjection operating on the level of form and of content: by manipulating the panel borders and page composition, Burns's style, through these multi-gendered composites, reveals the instability and contingency of a category assumed to be stable: gender. Another cluster of four panels repeats this gesture with an important difference. The first two panels again use the shot/reverse shot formation, this time rendering Chris and Rob as distinct both through their facial expressions but also through the angle; Rob is clearly above Chris in space. The final two panels, however, warp space to show their two faces as again forming one composite; Rob's sweat-pebbled face is halved to mirror Chris's silent, disbelieving expression. Burns's minimal style highlights the sameness of their faces; although Chris describes Rob's eyes as "perfect" and "dark," the shapes of their eyes make them almost indistinguishable. While much of *Black Hole* relies upon our ability as readers to distinguish and differentiate (between panels and narrators

and between infected and uninfected teenagers), the juxtaposition of these two panels collapses any immediate distinctions between Chris and Rob. The first example of Rob and Chris's hair and back juxtaposed served to destabilize gender, but by focusing on the face, this pair of panels does something even more radical. As the body part most associated with uniqueness and individuality, the face is a source of personality and subjectivity. By revealing the substitutability of Rob and Chris's faces, these panels reveal the contingency and permeability of the subject itself.

I want to conclude by returning to Keith and Eliza's first sexual encounter, a page that brings together the unbecoming of comics and characters' bodies in a bravura fantasy sequence. The panels appear on the page as a triptych, divided by gutters that indicate, through wavy and straight lines, Keith's fantasy on the top half and Eliza and Keith's physical encounter on the bottom. As Keith gets aroused, he imagines Chris lying naked in a wood, turned toward him against a background of foliage. In the top half of the next panel, Chris's head is no longer the focal point; instead, the grass in the middle ground now takes the form of a bushy female crotch. Because Chris has been moved into the middle ground of the fantasy image, we assume that the crotch belongs to Eliza: in Keith's thoughts, the unattainable object of his crush has been replaced by the actuality of the woman whose body he is discovering. But the bottom half of the second panel, outlined in straight rather than in the wavy lines that connote fantasy, indicates that Eliza is on top of Keith with her hands on his back. Keith cannot, in other words, actually be seeing Eliza as the image above depicts her. The top half of the final panel confuses anatomy and characters even further, when the pubis that we thought was a fantasy version of Eliza's is now unidentifiable as female or male; it's covered by a hand. A tail, which has been descending from the top of the previous two panels as a branch, wriggles toward the crotch. Since Eliza has a tail,

we assume that the tail belongs to her, which would mean that the concealed genitals should belong to Keith.

In the second panel, however, we assumed the crotch was Eliza's; by the end of this page, Keith has replaced his object's genitals with his own, splitting and doubling himself through his fantasy. In the third panel of Keith's fantasy, Eliza's tail appears to initiate phallic penetration, a masculine potency echoed and amplified by the wooden trees behind her. A second reading, however, also suggests itself through the conjunction of Eliza's tail, the placement of the hand, and the striated space between the tail and the hand. Instead of the hand covering Keith's genitals, the altered perspective of the wood draws the eye dramatically toward Keith's hand as though opening an orifice, while the texture and placement of the trees combined with Eliza's position on Keith's back suggest that he's imagining his own anal penetration. Both of these readings—the replacement of Keith's object with himself and the desire for anal penetration—seem to exist strictly the fantasy portion of the sex sequence. Eliza's physical movements, however, are narrated through captions that overlap the fantasy portion of the panels. These captions also obliquely gesture toward Keith's desire to be penetrated as they describe Eliza “filling [him] with her warmth.”

Although we might skim through these panels, understanding quickly that Keith is psyching himself up to lose his virginity, by paying closer attention to the visual puns and shifts in position, we see how the formal elements of comics queer this character's desires and even make the distinction between human and background permeable. The pulpy, horror-influenced style, in which black is used to create thick, atmospheric shadows textured with fine, insistent lines, creates an environment where the bush of the crotch is barely discernible from the bushy

grass and the slim trunks of trees angle to create an orifice.³⁰ Ostensibly human characters flicker in and out of the wilderness that surrounds them and absorbs them; maleness and femaleness occupy the same bodies, and seemingly heterosexual masculinity encompasses a desire to be penetrated. We can see through Eliza's mutation and her sexual encounter with Keith why the prevailing community finds teenagers infected by the Bug so threatening that those teenagers are forced to live in the woods. By revealing that masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality are merely contingent constructions, dependent on concepts and body parts that can easily be altered or even grown, the teenagers who are infected pose a threat to the security of the gender and sexual identities of those who are uninfected. Unbecoming, as exemplified through these readings of *Black Hole*, doesn't just undo the stability of identity categories such as gender and sexuality, however. Through the formal qualities of "all-at-once-ness" as well as the plot-driven mutations caused by the Bug, unbecoming poses a challenge to the characters' identity as individual, sovereign subjects, undoing their narrative control and agency.

I began this chapter with a catalogue of resistances: the resistances between image and word or symbol and icon, the resistance to popular perception of the comics medium, and the queer, feminist resistance of Joan's "Keep your God off my body." Ultimately, however, this chapter is less invested in resistance than in unbecoming—not something that characters *do*, but something that happens *to* them. Instead of resisting this medium's unseemly reputation, this chapter sinks into the combination of "kid's stuff" and pornography in order to challenge traditional interpretations of cuteness, abjection, and identification, as well as conventional

³⁰ Burns himself emphasizes the visual quality of the woods as lending it a specific character: "If you're looking at the texture of the woods in *Black Hole*, that starts to be a real element of the story, part of the character of the story" (qtd. in Chute, *Why Comics?* 156).

narratives of growing up into mature, heterosexual, sovereign (or even human) subjects. The negativity in comics generates contradictory possibilities for signification, undoing one unifying narrative trajectory. I've used this unbecoming excess to revise Groensteen's perverse "*medium-related pleasure*" to include not just the density of detail generated by images iterated in sequence but also the proliferation of contradictory meanings and narrative pathways provided by this hybrid medium, and the possibility for alternatives to identification that can be both dominating and pleurably, contagiously threatening to agency. Accordingly, while I opened the first section of this chapter with a close reading of a page from *Fun Home*, I'd like to return to the final panel of that page to consider another reading. While the image shows Alison actively pleasuring Joan, another, more passive reading suggests itself. In addition to a mode of resolution, the tenderness of Bechdel's concluding gesture on this page could also be read as a mode of unbecoming. Instead of resisting, like Odysseus, who "schemed desperately to escape," Alison opens herself to Joan's opening and gives herself over to an enjoyment that leaves her forever—or at least for the space of a panel—in a place of sweet monstrosity (Bechdel 214).

Showing some ‘Clivage’: Unbecoming Narrative and Visual Pleasure/Jouissance

Jonathan Glazer’s 2013 film, *Under the Skin*, seemed to provoke nothing but questions among its critics, baffling and delighting some viewers with its narratively incoherent exploration of, among other things, the inhuman, sexuality, and femininity. Starring American blockbuster actress Scarlett Johansson (who nevertheless began her film career with indies such as *Ghost World* and *Lost in Translation*), the film follows an unnamed, alien-in-human-skin protagonist as she cruises around Glasgow in order to lure men to their deaths for an interstellar human meat and skin business. As she gains more experience, she slowly begins to alter her behavior to participate in more conventionally “human” activities: tasting cake, forming a relationship with a human man, walking in the woods. The film has provoked extreme responses, in part because of its generic peculiarity: given the overt political goals of the original novel or the sci-fi nature of the premise, one might assume that this film would deliver an exciting action plot or an obvious political message. Instead, the lack of a clearly framed plot pushes the film closer to the narrative and epistemological opacity of art house cinema than the science fiction blockbuster. While many reviewers have stated that this film is a treatise on being or becoming human or female, I open this chapter’s investigation into unbecoming in film by exploring how *Under the Skin* presents the nonhuman or the “impersonal.”

In *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*, Christian Metz introduces the term “oriented objective images,” techniques such as the “punctuation marks” of a fade to black or an iris, to describe moments in film that “signal the articulation of the story” (122, 121). Metz calls them “oriented objective” in contrast to Francesco Casetti’s “impossible objective” terminology for the same type of filmic technique because he argues that these techniques supplement the overall narration, orienting the film to guide the viewer to a specific interpretation (IE 122).

Unlike other narrative filmic techniques, such as subjective images or point-of-view shots, which align the viewer with a character in the diegesis, oriented objective images clearly come from a place outside of the narrative, an instance of impersonal enunciation where the film “speaks” from its own perspective. Oriented objective techniques “materialize for an instance that ‘intentionality’ that belongs to the text itself, that ‘impersonal’ intentionality that Paul de Man speaks of for the literary work” (Metz, IE 134). We could also describe these moments, following Metz’s reference to de Man, as ones where these techniques make the viewer aware of the film in its materiality. In contrast to Metz’s interpretation, however, following my second chapter, de Man (and Gasché) would argue that points of textual self-awareness are radically destructive to meaning, rather than contributing to it—unmooring rather than orienting.

The particular epistemological concerns of *Under the Skin* position it to respond to this question: do oriented objective images articulate meaning or disarticulate narrative? There’s a unique instance of what Metz calls “punctuation” that complicates this question at the end of the film (IE 121). Johansson’s character has escaped her role as a lure for men and has ended up in the Scottish woods. She huddles alone in a small cabin designated for people who are hiking the trail. After she has curled up to sleep, the camera cuts to a high angle shot of the trees in the forest blowing in the wind. Slowly, through a dissolve, Johansson’s character’s sleeping body comes partially into focus, superimposed on the trees as though she were a sleeping giant. The scene doesn’t continue the dissolve, however; it abruptly cuts to Johansson’s sleeping character’s point of view as she’s woken by a logger groping her. This moment that uses the technique of a dissolve fits with Metz’s definition of the oriented objective image since it points to itself as unusual within the context of the film, where most transitions from scene to scene happen through abrupt cuts or fades to black. In its difference from other points of the film, we could

read this short, aborted transition sequence as one where, as Metz suggests, the film itself “speaks.”

In contrast to Metz’s conclusions about the oriented objective image as aiding in “comprehension of the plot,” however, this image of Johansson’s character superimposed on the trees lacks a clear interpretive pathway (IE 124). Are we to assume that this dissolve is part of Johansson’s character’s dream sequence, and so a sign that she is becoming more human by gaining the ability to dream? An article in *Film Quarterly*, “*Under the Skin*: The Perils of Becoming Female,” leads with an image of this dissolve, suggesting that the film plots Johansson’s alien’s journey toward becoming a woman. But the proximity and intimacy of Johansson’s body within the trees indicates instead vastness and closeness with nonhuman objects. Ara Osterweil’s caption for the image, “Mysterious geographies and ontologies surface in *Under the Skin*,” seems to support the latter interpretation rather than the former (44). Additionally, the emphasis on “mysterious” in Osterweil’s caption seems at odds with Metz’s insistence that oriented objective images occur “when an appropriate movement of the camera signals to us with a degree of insistence a detail that is useful for the comprehension of the plot” (IE 124). Since this aborted dissolve generates questions rather than comprehension, it troubles the “orienting” quality of an oriented objective image.

That one of the film’s clearest moments of enunciation, the moment when it announces itself as “*the filmic act as such*,” so defies obvious interpretation and narrative clarity is a clear marker of *Under the Skin*’s very resistance to meaning (Metz, IE 124). In fact, this oriented objective image from *Under the Skin*—a moment when the film announces itself as a film by drawing attention to a technique that ruptures progression of the plot—doesn’t so much orient as disorient the viewer. Beginning with this opening anecdote, this chapter intervenes in a long-

running conversation in cinema studies about ideology, spectatorship, and the role or prominence of narrative. According to Scott Bukatman, the publication of Tom Gunning's "The Cinema of Attraction(s): Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," describing a conceptualization of early cinema developed by Gunning with André Gaudreault in the early 1980s, marked an important schism in film studies between the ideologically-based theoretical approach associated with Metz and Gunning's approach, which emphasizes "a multi-determinate historiography," revealing major differences in the forms of early cinema and classical Hollywood cinema (71). Although my project is not historicist, this divide in cinema studies is relevant to this chapter's argument because of its emphasis on the role of narrative in cinema. While Gunning suggests that his "historical work...questioned Metz's theoretical assumption of a natural match between cinematic form and the mission of narrative," I instead use Metz's theory to show how narrative is undone by film's articulation of its own form ("Now You See It" 4). By bringing deconstructionist de Man and "antistructuralist" Roland Barthes into conversation with Metz, this chapter seeks out, beginning with Metz's oriented objective image, moments designed to establish narrative cohesion and clarity that actually work to undo narrative itself (Wadia 174). In other words, although I share Gunning's skepticism about "the mission of narrative" in film, instead of taking a historicist approach, I use theory itself to show first how narrative in film is undone and then how film theory can thwart its own internal production of epistemology. In this chapter, I redefine unbecoming as a phenomenon where a filmic or rhetorical technique designed to bring clarity and distinction is interrupted by materiality to produce obscurity, confusion, and collapse. Reading films and theory such as *Under the Skin*, Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," and

David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), I emphasize unbecoming's resistance to narrative to project new light on the flickering categories of the human body on film.

Enunciation à haute voix, Jouissance seen from the shores of pleasure

In a film that so foregrounds sexuality and seduction but so polarized viewers in terms of providing pleasure,³¹ *Under the Skin* poses a number of questions related to materiality, meaning, and pleasure. Can a film produce pleasure if meaning is obscured? And if not, is materiality—as a phenomenon that interrupts narrative—in opposition to pleasure? To explore these questions, I turn to Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, a book whose deliberate anti-systematicity³² also exemplifies a form of unbecoming where meaning is interrupted by materiality. Throughout the essay, Barthes appears to distinguish between two types of texts: texts of pleasure and texts of jouissance. Texts of pleasure are comforting and comfortable; they come from culture without breaking from it. Although they can produce intense affective responses like euphoria, and the practice of reading them can feel hedonistic, they don't provoke feelings of rupture. Texts of jouissance, on the other hand, are difficult and uncomfortable, almost, Barthes says, to the point

31 RottenTomatoes.com registers a 30% gap between critics and audience score (where audience score is defined by who "like it"): 85% to 55%. Despite the higher rating from critics, Peter Rainer, from the *Christian Science Monitor* calls the film "excruciatingly arty," while Matthew Lickona from the *San Diego Reader* wrote, "Glacial in pace, skeletal in plot, and generally nasty, Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* is a repetitive nightmare of drear and dread punctuated by moments of queasy-making horror" (quid in RottenTomatoes.com).

32 In *Bringing out Roland Barthes*, D.A. Miller writes that "gay fabulation...has been inseparable from a series of experiments needing to tamper with the most deeply imprinted aspects of traditional narrative form" (46). Even before Barthes's work expressed resistance to narrative at the level of form, Miller demonstrates that in his earlier work, *S/Z*, Barthes used his systematic, semiological "discursive pulverizations" to reveal and disconcert the naturalness and coherence of "Sarrasine" (47). Although Miller seems to be equivocal about *The Pleasure of the Text* by grouping it under the umbrella of Barthes's sinuous writing that is "at once sublimating gay content and undoing the sublimation"—he writes that "pleasure...is obliged for its expression to become—how unpromisingly!—a pleasure 'of the text'"—I place the essay among Barthes's later works as a formal experiment in what Miller calls "gay fabulation"; through redefining and intertwining pleasure and jouissance and through his discontinuous, epigrammatical form, Barthes "tampers" with narrative (27).

of *ennui*. These texts put the reader's relationship to herself and her culture in doubt, even to the point of creating a crisis in the way she relates to language (French edition 26). Barthes describes *jouissance* using the specific psychoanalytic sense of self-shattering, or "*la grande perte subjective*," the great loss of the subject (French edition 93). Despite these ostensible attempts to separate pleasure and *jouissance*, *The Pleasure of the Text* also exhibits unbecoming: a slipperiness in relation to meaning that is expressed both in the content of the essay and in its formal resistance to systematicity. Through this reading of *The Pleasure of the Text*, I develop the terms and structures that show how narrative-driven films such as *Under the Skin* and *Crash* in fact contain elements that interrupt narrative and forestall signification.

While Barthes frequently defines "plaisir" and "jouissance" in opposition to each other (or elaborates on how *le plaisir du texte* and *le texte de plaisir* are different), these categories are under constant threat of collapse and contradiction. He insistently and repeatedly suggests that the definitions of these terms (*plaisir* and *jouissance*) and how he uses them are provisional and not systematic. From the beginning, he insists that "(Pleasure/Bliss: terminologically there is always a vacillation—I stumble, I err. In any case, there will always be a margin of indecision; the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete.)" (Miller translation 4). Later he even expresses frustration with the French language, writing "*plaisir du texte, texte de plaisir*" (pleasure of/from the text, text of pleasure) "these expressions are ambiguous because there is no French word that simultaneously expresses pleasure (contentment) and *jouissance* (fainting away, loss of self)" (French edition 33). Certainly, *plaisir* and *jouissance* mean different things in French. In the English translation, for example, Richard Miller uses "bliss" for *jouissance* in order to distinguish it from pleasure, requiring me to refer back to the original French to

recapture its specifically sexual connotations. If, as Miller's translation choices and my own attempt, these distinctions hope to eliminate ambiguity by constructing elaborate definitions of how *jouissance* and pleasure differ, surely this is at odds with the very reversibility and precarity with which Barthes opens the essay.

Given Barthes's stated suspicion of systems of meaning and epistemology in *The Pleasure of the Text*, I conclude that an attempt to define *plaisir* and *jouissance* in opposition to each other defeats the episodic and mobile form of the essay itself. In an unbecoming gesture, Barthes both defines texts of pleasure and texts of *jouissance* separately and collapses the terms onto themselves. For example, in the section "Clivage," or split, Barthes moves from listing the different qualities of these types of texts to describing the subject who would be able experience *plaisir* and *jouissance* at the same time. He writes, "*il jouit de la consistance de son moi (c'est son plaisir) et recherche sa perte (c'est sa jouissance). C'est un sujet deux fois clivé, deux fois pervers*" (French edition 26). In other words, the subject who is able to experience simultaneously the two senses of the pleasure/*jouissance* of the text enjoys both the consistence of his self, his ego, which is his pleasure, and then looks for its loss (which is his *jouissance*). This subject, according to Barthes, is doubly split, doubly perverse. This sense is captured in Miller's translation, but I include the text in the original French, however, because of the verb "*jouir*," "to enjoy" or, in its sexual connotation, "to come." *Jouir*, where *jouissance* comes from, is used in Barthes's sentence to describe the experience of pleasure. Through the verb "*jouir*," Barthes weaves together pleasure and *jouissance* in the same section where he elaborates on the separate qualities of the two types of texts.

"*Jouit*" is the final verb, and final word, of *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes concludes by describing a concept he titles "*écriture à haute voix*," (or writing aloud), that he associates

specifically with cinema and *jouissance* (French edition 105). *Écriture à haute voix* happens in the cinema when a filmmaker creates a sense of too-closeness of a voice—a voice that hangs in the air in its own materiality and, through that materiality, supersedes signification. In its closeness, this voice, Barthes suggests, separates the signified and throws instead the anonymous body of the actor into Barthes’s ear (French edition 105). Barthes’s final sentence lists in a seductive climax the effects of experiencing *écriture à haute voix*: “à jeter, pour ainsi dire, le corps anonyme de l’acteur dans mon oreille: ça granule, ça grésille, ça caresse, ça rape, ça coupe: ça jouit” (French edition 105). In this list, Barthes links the indefinite demonstrative pronoun “ça,” “it” or “that,” to a verb conjugated in the third person singular. In the English translation, however, the final sentence reads: “it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss” (67). In an effort to clarify, classify, and separate, Miller doubles the sense of “ça jouit”—translating it not only as “it comes” but also as “that is bliss.” By making the verb “jouit” into the noun “bliss,” Miller works against Barthes’s explicit resistance to systematization. Miller enacts, in a way, the double pleasure and perversion of the split subject in “Clivage”: he enjoys both the coherence of his self by putting a name and a noun to the thing Barthes describes (“that is bliss”) but also the *jouissance* and loss of self of translating “jouit” as “to come.” Instead of reveling in the disorientation of a verb linked to both pleasure and *jouissance*, “that is bliss” precisely predicates a specific term and restrains the spectrum of meaning invited in Barthes’s original.

By privileging meaning over indeterminacy, the translation contradicts one of Barthes’s key points about *écriture à haute voix*: it emphasizes materiality rather than signification. Barthes depicts this materiality in the double sense of the French “*la langue*,” which is commonly used to mean both language and tongue in a more literal sense than the English

“tongue” (105). According to Barthes, *écriture à haute voix* values the body, the tongue as the instrument of language, above meaning in language. In its emphasis on materiality over meaning, *écriture à haute voix* is comparable to how I’ve reinterpreted Metz’s oriented objective image through close readings of *Under the Skin*: as something that announces the film in its own materiality to the audience. In Barthes’s example, *écriture à haute voix* is an unusual mode of enunciation where the organs of the actor’s body, his rasps and sibilance, speak rather than his words or the machinations of the plot. The oriented objective image also introduces the viewer to an unusual perspective—enunciation stemming from the film itself. Both moments, in their materiality—whether from a sudden awareness of the embodiment of the projected actor or the jolt of realizing that the film itself is speaking—alter the viewer’s relation to the film such that attempts to create meaning are transformed into meaninglessness.

Taking a cue from Barthes’s suggestion from an earlier passage in *The Pleasure of the Text* that texts of jouissance are never simply representations of orgasm, I look sideways for an example of *écriture à haute voix* in *Under the Skin*. Instead of an example of Johansson’s voiceover, which might be the most obvious parallel to how Barthes describes the body of the actor thrown into his ear, I turn to the film’s nonhuman, seemingly disembodied soundtrack. The soundtrack in *Under the Skin* can be read as *écriture à haute voix* because of the ways it frames and emphasizes the film’s depictions of Johansson’s voluptuous body. In the first seduction scene in *Under the Skin* that occurs in the Black Room, a slick, mirror-like space that seems to extend forever and in which Johansson’s alien stores and processes her human prey, Mica Levi’s soundtrack is an essential component. Caitríona Walsh emphasizes Levi’s unique soundtrack and “the corporeal sound design process, where the predatory and carnal aspects of Johansson’s character were invoked by scrunching dry leaves and sliding grains of rice across metal trays.

This novel approach to bodily sounds was deliberately designed as an alternative to the expected auditory emissions of an alien creature” (48). According to Walsh’s reading, Johansson’s embodied quality as an actress was conveyed through the sound, creating a more organic, although deeply unfamiliar, alternative to more common metallic or electronic sound design for an alien character. In the seduction scenes, Levi’s music and sound design work alongside the visuals to throw Johansson’s body into the viewer’s ear as both nonhuman but extremely corporeal, evoking an aspect of *écriture à haute voix* in the film grammar’s insistence on materiality.

The soundtrack also adheres to Metz’s original definition of an oriented objective image because it orients the reader in relation to place and event. The music of the seduction scene creeps in with its heartbeat-like percussion accompanied by a breathy echo, serving as a suture between the scene in the car where the alien picks up her first victim and the scene in the Black Room. Since we’re given very little context about where these murderous seductions take place, the music, rather than visual cues such as an exterior shot of the alien’s lair, serve to establish a sense of place. In this way, the soundtrack to *Under the Skin* works like an aural version of an oriented objective image. It serves as another enunciation of the film itself, anchoring the viewer in terms of location and cueing them on how to feel—creeped out yet fascinated. In the case of this scene, where the alien is luring her victim to his death in her skin and meat extraction chamber, the score also adds tension with its high, inhuman strings.

While the comparison to oriented objective images makes sense in the context of how the soundtrack grounds and guides the viewer, this reading is complicated by Levi’s suggestion that the theme is not just an enunciation of the film itself (in terms of being nondiegetic sound) but music manipulated by the alien herself. In an interview with Levi, the composer states that the

alien “uses that theme -- it's her tool. At the beginning, it's like fake -- it's her perfume, it's the way she reels in these guys with a tune” (qtd. in Romney). Indeed, in the first seduction scene, the score accompanies the man’s entrance into the alien’s lair, the striptease sequence when he stumbles after the alien across the Black Room as they both undress, and the moment where he sinks into the chamber below. The instant the man is submerged, however, the theme abruptly stops, and the alien walks back across the room, dressing herself in silence. It’s as though the alien turns the sound off as soon as she’s accomplished the necessary goal of the seduction, manipulating the music with the same ease as she did her human prey. If I read this moment as one of enunciation from the point of the film, and Levi reads the alien as manipulating the score, however, what does it mean that the film and the alien protagonist are in the same position? I read this apparent contradiction as a symptom of unbecoming. Because the soundtrack orients and anchors the audience, it should create meaning. But the materiality of Johnasson’s body, evoked both by her performance captured visually and the accompanying, corporeal soundtrack and sound design, works, like Barthes’s *écriture à haute voix*, to separate the signifier and the signified, foregrounding materiality rather than meaning. In this science fiction *cum* art house film, the protagonist doubles as the inhuman enunciation of the film. Just as Barthes braids pleasure and *jouissance* through the verb *jouir*, so an inhuman protagonist and the enunciation of the film are intertwined.

Another film that polarized viewers and critics, *Crash*, also provides a frame for questions of meaning and pleasure. One of the film’s most puzzling qualities is that, for a film that is largely composed of sex scenes, it has been perceived as remarkably unsexy. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson write about the film, “*Crash* starts from the premise, attributed to Michel Foucault, that ‘sex is boring.’ Boredom is the film’s milieu” (186). Barbara Creed describes with

intensity the violence of images purveyed in *Crash* but then suggests that “despite its perverse subject-matter, *Crash* is oddly and unexpectedly detached” (175). Many reviewers (both scholarly and journalistic) noted the film’s flatness or described feeling “grim fascination” (Maslin qtd in Duncan 208). Although the film’s content follows sex-obsessed protagonist James Ballard as he discovers and gets drawn into a group of car crash fetishists following his own experience of a car accident, for many viewers, Cronenberg generates the feeling of a banal reality, reshaping the very kinky, outré elements of *Crash* into something many viewers found boring, slick, and distanced. Why do the affects *Crash* generated among many viewers not match the elements of *Crash*? And why does *Crash* seem so resolutely to refuse viewers visual pleasure? I suggest that these gaps and contradictions are symptoms of unbecoming at work in *Crash*, but that this undoing of narrative and systems of meaning does not stem from the same sort of materiality elucidated in relation to the oriented objective image or *écriture à haute voix*. While Gunning suggests that classical cinema works to absorb its audience through “narrative logic and diegetic realism,” I will show how the very slickness of the film’s production, the glossy surface of “diegetic realism” in which the spectator is not acknowledged, instead works to create an affective experience that prevents audience absorption in the narrative, instead provoking boredom and detachment (“An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 827). Crucial to this interpretation are Barthes’s concepts both of plaisir /jouissance and of the subject of pleasure/the subject of jouissance. By emphasizing how these categories are simultaneously distinct and inextricable, I offer a reading of the affective contradiction at the heart of *Crash*.

Crash’s gap between the subject matter and the reported audience responses results from a series of shifts and contradictions between desiring figures. As a film about car crash fetishists, the characters’ jouissance depends not upon another human being but upon a machine. As Pansy

Duncan points out, this makes for odd, triangulated sex scenes, such as the opening scene where Catherine gets fucked while she's pleasuring herself against a plane. Duncan notes that the person fucking Catherine barely gets any screen time: "the camera maintains an exclusive focus on the real liaison taking place between Catherine and the nose of the plane, the idiosyncratic two-shot effecting a kind of visual enjambment that conflates the strangely dehumanizing state of fascination with the literally inhuman prop that is its object" (211). Fascination with and sexual arousal from machines, particularly cars, is hardly a new theme in cinema. Watching *Christine* (1983) or any opening scene in a James Bond movie where Bond and a beautiful woman engage in a car chase shows that automobiles are already well-established vehicles for representations of sexual exuberance and libidinal investment. One difference in *Crash*, however, is that the cars are not really fetish objects; they are not substitutions to cover over the threat of castration or props to facilitate the sex act. The cars and other "inhuman props" in *Crash* are themselves the sex objects, not thinly veiled representations of virility or metaphors for relationships with controlling women.

To address the question of visual un-pleasure in *Crash*, I draw from *The Pleasure of the Text*, where he writes that boredom is "jouissance seen from the shores of pleasure" (French edition 43). Could the confusion, boredom, and narrative disorientation critics feel watching *Crash* be a simple problem of position: are they watching *Crash* from the shores of pleasure? Duncan's reading also speculates on the hostile critical and public response to *Crash*, attributing the public's outrage not to the film's incendiary sex scenes, but to the blasé affect that accompanies them:

these censorship campaigns can be traced not to the film's content but to the unsettling disparity between the film's content and its form, between the rough surface and its

glossy packaging. After all, this disparity projects a specter that stirs the anxieties plaguing late-twentieth-century Western conservative movements more deeply than mere sex perversion itself—the specter of the evacuated, dehumanized, affectless subject who fails to register sex perversion’s horror. (218)

But, even as *Crash* shifts the register of sexuality from person-to-person to person-to-machine, thereby qualifying as sex perversion, *Crash* also reveals the mechanical nature of sex by literalizing it; the hydraulics of the “sex and car crashes” in *Crash* are just less organic than the hydraulics of human bodies. That is to say, just as Barthes collapses pleasure and jouissance, *Crash* collapses the perverse and the ordinary. What’s more, that same “evacuated, dehumanized, affectless subject who fails to register sex perversion’s horror” is not just a character in *Crash* who seeks wilder encounters with greater intensity, but also the many viewers who found the chemistry mechanical, the plot frankly boring. In other words, *Crash* shows that Barthes’s concept of boredom/jouissance as seen from the shores of pleasure does not separate between “evacuated, dehumanized, affectless subject[s]” and normal, ordinary ones. Because the question is one of position, rather than something inherent to the subject, all viewers of *Crash* are potentially both ordinary subjects of pleasure and perverse subjects of jouissance.

Although *Crash* contains the qualities of materiality that might result in a rupture between form and content, content and affect, this materiality is not a result of the film’s articulation being made visible, as it is in *Under the Skin*. In *Crash*, the moments where materiality interrupts the process of meaning-making to instead produce its opposite are in those of radical boredom where the mechanics of sex are made visible. After all, as Lee Edelman defines it, sex is “something to do with experiencing corporeally, and in the orbit of the libidinal, the shock of discontinuity and the encounter with nonknowledge”; sex always has the potential

to produce the same result of what I am calling materiality by disrupting knowledge-production and the progression of narrative (Berlant and Edelman 4). Sex on film, however, is frequently metaphorized, as in the case of *Christine* or James Bond in the car or, perhaps most famously, the final sequence in *North by Northwest* of the train going into the tunnel. As metaphors, these figurations of sex work to convey meaning, rather than disrupt it. In *Crash*, because the sex is motivated by and with cars, metaphor is stripped away. With mechanics as the tenor, rather than the vehicle, sex in *Crash* is released from the pressure of signification. Roger Ebert would say that, in order to enjoy it, we would need to watch *Crash* from the perspective of a computer or of “no one,” an impossible, inhuman perspective³³. What this reading of sex in *Crash* shows, however, is that it’s not a matter of shifting our position, from one of pleasure to jouissance, or from one of ordinary, family-oriented sex to perverse sex, but rather that these positions collapse in on each other: in the unbecoming materiality of *Crash*, that impossible, inhuman perspective is revealed to be our own.

I am the projector

The Pleasure of the Text, *Under the Skin*, and *Crash* are all texts that are generically and formally predisposed to befuddle epistemology, even as the films in particular have a duty to produce narrative. In art house film and Barthes’s critical essay, in which D.A. Miller diagnoses a “generic intolerance” to narrative, one practically expects the production of meaning or narrative to be ruptured through materiality (*Bringing* 48). But what happens to a genre invested in making a system of meaning, such as a philosophical inquiry, when materiality intervenes? In

³³ In his review of *Crash*, Ebert suggests that “It’s like a porno movie made by a computer,” and declares ““Crash” is about characters entranced by a sexual fetish that, in fact, no one has.”

other words, what happens to a system of dialectics when the solution, the synthesis that makes sense of the thesis and antithesis, happens at the level of the human body? In this context, Walter Benjamin's dialectical approach in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" might seem counterintuitive in a chapter that values materiality and collapse over systems that make meaning out of contradictions. By examining the second version of "Work of Art,"³⁴ however, I read the interplay between thesis/antithesis, human/film apparatus as another kind of unbecoming, where Benjamin synthesizes film and humanity to change the composition of the human sensorium itself. Benjamin's resolution of this contradiction comes at a cost: this synthesis produces a change in the language of his philosophical text. While the previous section explored *The Pleasure of the Text* alongside *Under the Skin* and *Crash* in order to show how unbecoming works on film narrative, this section pairs "Work of Art" with *Crash*, which also explores the imbrication of the human body with technology, as a counterpoint to show how materiality at the level of human body does not always result in the same unbecoming effect. Although the previous section revealed epistemological and affective contradictions within *Crash* that affect an audience's absorption in the narrative, a Metzian reading of the cinephile's fetish for technology shows how unbecoming can be folded back into knowledge through the film's enunciation of its own construction.

In "Work of Art," Benjamin describes film and its relationship to the concept of humanity in equivocal and sometimes even contradictory ways. He refers to film as positive and

³⁴ Following Miriam Hansen, I choose to write about the second version of the essay instead of the more widely circulated 1939 version published by Theodor Adorno because it contains a greater range of writing on the role of film in Benjamin's project "to imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics on a par with modern, collective experience, an aesthetics that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed-capitalist and imperialist, destructive and self-destructive-reception of technology" (183). Hansen traces this mode of aesthetics through several senses of the German word *Spiel*, "play," a term that falls out of the later draft of the essay, while I follow how Benjamin thinks about film in relation to the film actor and the film audience (195).

productive, an instrument for a utopic fusion of people and technology leading to the Marxist revolution. His writings on film here could also be read as not leading to a revolution but as training for better submission to alienation under capitalism. Section VII contains an example of these two different poles of interpretation:

The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free (26-27, italics in original).

In the first sentence, Benjamin seems to suggest that film is a mechanism that trains the masses to cope with their social position, an opiate that helps them live with the apparatus without changing their situation. In the second sentence, however, Benjamin states more clearly that his project for film is not one of lulling the masses into more comfortable complacency but rather changing the nature of humanity entirely: that the whole human sensorium will adapt with technology in order to achieve a hybrid, symbiotic state of “play” (26). Benjamin’s synthesis of these contradictory sets of theses and antitheses—film as habituating/film as revolutionary, technology/humanity—happens at the level of the human body through the adaptation of “humanity’s whole constitution” (27). The consequence of the resolution, of using a material, embodied solution to a conceptual contradiction, can be seen as Benjamin expands on the relation between the film viewer and the cinema and the film actor and the film apparatus.

Benjamin first emphasizes the social power of the film actor in a thesis based on the masses who see him on screen. The actor’s performance, Benjamin insists, is analogous to taking

a test in front of the taxing and vexing equipment of film-making: arc lamps, boom mikes, giant cameras, etc. “To accomplish [this performance],” Benjamin claims, “is to preserve one’s humanity in the face of the apparatus” (31). For the masses who enter the movie theater after a long day of “[relinquishing] their humanity in the face of an apparatus,” the experience of watching the film actor on screen is one of “[witnessing] the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph” (31). In other words, the film actor’s supposed triumph over the technology that reproduces him on screen allows the viewer vicarious revenge over the dreadful apparatus of capitalist modernity that subjugates him by day. Benjamin’s parenthetical aside, however, throws any efficacy of this revenge into doubt. By qualifying the assertion of the film actor’s humanity with “or what appears to them as such,” Benjamin implies that the film actor’s triumph as perceived by the audience is only an illusion (31).

When Benjamin flips the perspective, by detailing this same experience from the point of view of the film actor, he traces an antithesis that underlines the illusory quality of the revenge perceived by the film audience. Benjamin quotes Luigi Pirandello’s novel *Si Gira, Shoot!*, in order to describe the alienation the actor feels in front of the camera and when seeing himself on screen:

The film actor...feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With a vague unease, he senses an inexplicable void, stemming from the fact that his body has lost its substance, that he has been volatilized, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence...The little

apparatus will play with his shadow before the audience, and he himself must be content to play before the apparatus. (Pirandello, qtd. in Benjamin 31)

This double alienation that happens both while the actor performs before the apparatus of film technology and when watching his own performance on a projection is in opposition to the feelings of revenge that are experienced vicariously by Benjamin's audience earlier in "Work of Art." What appears to them as the "[assertion of] his humanity" is in fact a fiction, an alienating experience for the film actor and a fragmented reconstitution of "many individual performances" (32). Instead of triumphant, the film actor feels "volatilized," that his body has "lost its substance." These feelings might also seem in opposition to the unbecoming materiality that I've been tracing throughout this chapter; however, it is precisely to the body where Benjamin turns in order to resolve the contradiction of film audience versus film actor.

Benjamin synthesizes these two positions by clarifying that "*the representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation*" (32, his italics). Instead of conceiving of film as a balm for the masses who have been fragmented by their labor, as an antidote to alienation, he claims that it is both a product of that alienation and a productive use of that alienation. This uneasy synthesis, neither entirely positive nor negative, turns to outright destruction. In a surreal, post-apocalyptic turn that tonally evokes what Miriam Hansen might call a "messianic temporality" (193), Benjamin writes,

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on

journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. (37)

In this passage, it is as if the viewers are absorbed into the film, as if they might walk into the reality created by the film and experience the wreckage of their quotidian life first hand. In the final sentence, film space has absorbed quotidian space (37). Here, Benjamin's dialectical traversal through audience/film and film/film actor points toward a change to the human sensorium to accommodate play and interplay with technology. As if the cinema apparatus has melded with the human body, he describes the abilities of photography to show things unperceivable to the human eye affecting the realities of space and movement. This play and interplay with the film apparatus is supported by the German word "*Spiel*," or play: the film actor is called a "*Schauspieler*" (literally "show player"), contemporary German slang for the cinema was "*Lichtspiele*" or "games of light" (Hansen 190), and Benjamin terms the space created by cinema a "*Spielraum*," a "room for play" (37). This moment of synthesis, however, also marks a change in Benjamin's language. In the previous sections which sought to systematize a philosophy of meaning, Benjamin uses distancing techniques, referring to "the human being's self-alienation" (32) and using third person pronouns such as "one" or "them," instead of including himself in his inquiry. In this famous passage, by contrast, the tone switches to become vivid and literary. Suddenly, Benjamin includes himself in the narrative with first person plural pronouns. Instead of the body of the film actor jumping over meaning in order to whisper directly into Barthes's ear, the unbecoming materiality of this adaptation Benjamin predicts in the human body has usurped the philosophical tone of his epistemological inquiry to produce a surreal adventure story.

We can see versions of Benjamin's imbrications of film with reality and technology with the human body play out in the distinctly un-playful film, *Crash*. As if unknowingly responding to Benjamin's project in "Work of Art," Vaughan, the leader of the car crash fetishists, first pitches the goals of his car crash project to Ballard as "the reshaping of the human body by modern technology." Although Vaughan is speaking about the car crash, we can read a passage from Metz's *Imaginary Signifier* as another response via film technology:

When I say that 'I see' the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release, since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records. (51)

Here Metz gives the lie to Benjamin's crowds who mass into the theaters after their workday to reclaim their humanity by vicariously enjoying the film actor's triumph over the apparatus: in watching the film, they become part of the apparatus itself. Instead of entering the *Spielraum* to cavort in the rubble of the old world that the cinema has shattered, Metz suggests that the relationship with technology that the cinema brings is an even closer, but less utopic one: the "toy" of early film is broken, lost, replaced by a truly cyborg vision where the spectator becomes the apparatus (IS 80).

Although *Crash* is infamously about "sex and car crashes," from the beginning it points to this other technology of desire that reshapes the human body: film (Maslin). The film is an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash*; Cronenberg's *Crash* contains a nod to its original source through the name of James Ballard, who also happens to be played by a James: James Spader. While the film eliminates repeated references to Elizabeth Taylor that are present in the

novel, both the novel and the film adaptation feature recreations of celebrity car crashes, such as the ones that caused the deaths of James Dean and Jayne Mansfield. The second scene depicts a film set, where the first lines are spoken by a crew member: “Looking for James—does anyone know who I mean, James Ballard, the producer of this epic?” As the camera reveals that James Ballard is giving another young crewmember oral sex in a closet filled with film reels, we hear a distant petulant voice asking, “could we please get your stamp of approval on this Steadicam shot?” These insistently self-referential moments create an overlap between the fiction of the film setting and the reality of its production, absorbing reality into the “*Spielraum*” of the film as Benjamin describes the viewer being absorbed into the film. Cronenberg’s turn back or redoubling of Benjamin’s interplay between human and film is taken even further through the film’s setting: Toronto, which frequently serves as a double for major American cities in film and television productions. While Benjamin proposes that film exploded our banal reality in favor of an adventurous alternative where we can see in clear, focused close-up or watch each movement of a horse gallop in slow motion, Cronenberg shows us film production. Instead of enchanting viewers with Hollywood glamour, Cronenberg gives us Toronto.

Although these moments might seem like ones in which the film itself enunciates by revealing its own materiality, they differ from *Under the Skin*’s examples of oriented objective images because of their emphasis on knowledge rather than the production of ambiguity. When the crewperson on set asks for a sign off on the Steadicam shot, for example, alert filmgoers might experience the self-satisfying, ego-enhancing pleasure of knowing what a Steadicam is and where it has been used in the film itself. This phenomenon is an example of Metz’s fetishistic cinema lover, who, “must think at every moment (and above all *simultaneously*) of the force of presence the film has and of the absence on which this force is constructed. He must

constantly compare the result with the means deployed (and hence pay attention to the technique), for his pleasure lodges in the gap between the two” (IS 74-75). The cineaste’s pleasure lies not only in the experience of enjoyment of the film, but the experience of knowing more than the average cinema goer, of knowing how the film produces pleasure. As Barthes so coyly asks in a parenthetical in *The Pleasure of the Text*: “what if knowledge itself were *delicious*?” (Miller translation 23). Indeed, Metz’s fetishistic cinephile is strikingly similar to Barthes split subject reader, who enjoys *jouissance* from the safe position of pleasure. Metz insists that “the fetish not only has disavowal value, but also *knowledge value*”; in other words, instead of getting pleasure only from the “but all the same,” the cinephile fetishist also gets pleasure from knowing that they are watching a film (76). In this fetishistic structure, the power of materiality to rupture the film narrative is covered over by the enjoyment of the cinephile, who instead of feeling disoriented by the film’s self-referentiality, might feel even more secure in their knowledge of film production.

Decoding of meaning at the cinema weaves together the seeming dichotomy of the fetish that divides knowledge (the disavowal of the “I know perfectly well but”) from pleasure (the “all the same”) to produce pleasure from knowledge or the pursuit of knowing itself. *Crash* provides an example of this when Dr. Helen Remington, Ballard’s fellow crash victim and sometimes lover, is watching a crash dummy test video with Vaughan. When the VHS player stalls, Dr. Remington responds like an addict denied her next fix, muttering tensely, “I’m sure we see this again in slow motion. Closer, I mean. In detail.” Remington’s desire to see something in close up, in slow motion, also shows her will to know, to look more closely at how things work, to penetrate the car crash’s interior motions, to have an omniscient, inhuman camera’s perspective: she’s using the camera as a prosthesis and a sex aid. Benjamin suggests that the cinematic

apparatus allows humans to supplement their sensorium and witness things they would otherwise not witness: “photography ... can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens ... but not to the human eye, or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether” (21). *Crash* takes Benjamin’s concept of film as reshaping our sensorium and mediating our interactions with the apparatus and adapts it to layer in cars and sex. It’s as if Cronenberg says, “Sure there will be interplay between humanity and the apparatus. But there will be interpenetration too.” In service of this sexualized interpenetration, the film lingers salaciously on the technology of injury, showing elaborate leg braces, bruises, and wounds with the attentiveness of a lover. Unlike in Benjamin’s “Work of Art,” however, the interplay between the human body and the machine seems to result not in an unbecoming interruption to systems of meaning-making, but, as in the case of Metz’s cinephile fetishist, pleasure from knowledge itself.

An amorous distance

There is something to confess: your speaker likes to *leave* a movie theater. Back out on the more or less empty, more or less brightly lit sidewalk (it is invariably at night, and during the week, that he *goes*), and heading uncertainly for some café or other, he walks in silence (he doesn’t like discussing the film he’s just seen), a little dazed, wrapped up in himself, feeling the cold—he’s *sleepy*, that’s what he’s thinking, his body has become something *sopitive*, soft, limp, and he feels a little disjointed, even (for a moral

organization relief comes only from this quarter) irresponsible. In other words, obviously, he's coming out of hypnosis. (Barthes, *Rustle* 345)

Why does film bring out these particular questions of pleasure, meaning, and narrative so critical to unbecoming? In Metz's *Imaginary Signifier*, he suggests that the spectral quality of film comes from its flickering between absence and presence. Because film is produced in the studio, the projected film is a representation of a representation: "At the cinema, [Sarah Bernhardt] could make the same two kinds of speeches too [either "I am the character I am playing" or "I am Sarah Bernhardt"], but it would be her shadow that would be offering them to me (or she would be offering them to me in her own absence). Every film is a fiction film" (Metz, IS 44). Film, then, is built upon a foundation where the narratives into which viewers become absorbed are nothing but light and shadow. The peculiar quality of this absorption is described by Barthes in the epigraph quoted above; film generates in some viewers an extraordinary lassitude and rapt passivity: Barthes describes the sensation of leaving a movie theater as "coming out of hypnosis" (*Rustle* 345). Materiality acts to gum up the works of this system, interrupting the hypnotic narrative built on absence by revealing the film as a film in certain cases of oriented objective images, dislodging the signified from the signifier through *écriture à haute voix*, or generating an affect out of joint with the material portrayed by separating banal form from content that should titillate. While the non-agentive, zombie-like state of thrall in the movie theater described by Barthes is itself unbecoming, it seems at odds with the unbecoming prompted by materiality, where this hypnosis generated by the experience of being absorbed into the film's narrative is interrupted. This concluding section, then, returns to the question posed by the first section: is materiality always in opposition to visual pleasure?

In answering this question, I turn to two theorists who reveal how ideologies of domination are implicitly or explicitly espoused by film: Laura Mulvey and bell hooks. By attending to their critiques of the dangers (or even foreclosure) of visual pleasure in its imbrication with logics of sexism and racism, alongside Barthes's hazy, non-sovereign account of leaving the movie theater, I begin to craft an unbecoming alternative to identifying with these oppressive narratives that does not reinvest the viewing subject with the ego-enhancing knowledge of Metz's cinephile fetishist.

Barthes describes the source of this visual pleasure in more detail in another passage from the essay quoted in this section's epigraph, "Leaving the Movie Theater." Indeed, the essay could serve as a first-person account of the highly subjective, affective response of being at the movies; Philip Watts writes that the opening "passage reads as if Barthes were writing the first lines of a novel" (67). The hypnosis that Barthes experiences in the movie theater is partly due, for him, to the quality of the cinema itself, the way that sitting in a chair in a dark theater with surrounding sound and an encompassing, glowing image absorbs him utterly:

The image is there, in front of me, for me: coalescent (its signified and its signifier melted together), analogical, total, pregnant; it is a perfect lure: I fling myself upon it like an animal upon the scrap of 'lifelike' rag held out to him; and, of course, it sustains in me the misreading attached to Ego and to image-repertoire. In the movie theater, however far away I am sitting, I press my nose against the screen's mirror, against that 'other' image-repertoire with which I narcissistically identify myself (it is said that the spectators who choose to sit as close to the screen as possible are children and movie buffs); the image captivates me, captures me: I am *glued* to the representation, and it is this glue which

established the *naturalness* (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene (a glue prepared with all the ingredients of ‘technique’)... (*Rustle* 348)

Here, the resistance to signification that *écriture à haute voix* presents in the movie theater, where the body of the actor interrupts the lure of the image, is not present. Instead of the anonymous body of the actor leaping in his ear, Barthes glues himself to the screen. The power of the cinematic image and experience generates a hypnotic state because it engulfs him in a “natural” “reality” where there is no perceivable gap between the signifier and the signified. Barthes switches between being an active subject—“I fling myself,” “I press my nose”—and a trapped object—“the image captivates me, captures me: I am glued.” This ease in switching between subject and object positions evokes a type of linguistic unbecoming I discuss in my first chapter even as it also describes the experience of a film unadulterated by materiality’s interruptions.

Although this “lure” of “naturalness” is deeply pleasurable, Barthes himself is ambivalent enough about its effects to state that he prefers leaving the movie theater to being at the cinema.³⁵ The lack of a perceivable gap between the signifier and signified, and indeed the pleasure that comes from the cinema itself, has been the subject of a long genealogy of feminist, Marxist, and critical race theory critique. As Laura Mulvey explains, summarizing her own influential article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “feminist film theory has argued that cinema finds, not its only, but its most perfect, fetishistic object in the image of woman... Just as an elaborate and

³⁵ Watts opens his book, *Roland Barthes’ Cinema* by admitting that many critics describe Barthes as being “allergic to film” (1). He troubles this assumption both in the introduction, where he writes that Barthes’s writing about the movies traced something closer to “resistance...a sort of compromise between fascination and repulsion, or rather the alternation of critique and fascination, of turning away from while turning toward the sensual delectation of the image” (1). Indeed, in Watts’s chapter on “Leaving the Movie Theater,” he contends that the essay “is not as much about rejecting the medium as it is about delighting in the pleasure he feels when the altered state into which the film has put him lingers on beyond the end of the projection” (68).

highly artificial, dressed-up, made-up appearance envelops the movie star in ‘surface,’ so does her surface supply a glossy front for the cinema, holding the eye in fascinated distraction away from its mechanics of production” (13). For Mulvey, the lure of the cinema image is doubly problematic because it not only, from a Marxist perspective, conceals the means of production of the film, but in service of that erasure, it also takes the woman as its object, rather than its subject. bell hooks also argues against the hypnotic pleasure of cinema, writing that “when most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation” (308). Like Mulvey, hooks sees mainstream media as a source of unquestioning ideology pernicious to people in marginalized positions. hooks poses a different way of viewing: the oppositional gaze. This gaze is “a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation,” where a critical distance is compounded by a look and a conversation that foments resistance (316). In addition to altering a way of looking, Mulvey also suggests a change in film through “the rejection of realism as an aesthetic strategy”; she writes that “theories that conceptualized a gap between sign and referent have been a source of liberation” (10). Like Barthes, Mulvey notes the power of the image as a sign without a gap between the signifier and signified and the danger of “naturalness” in film. In fact, her film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) opens with a voiceover from an unidentified character accompanied by shots of a barren urban landscape, disorienting the viewer through asynchronous sound and image.

Another alternative to identification with ideologies of domination in cinema might be presented by the cinema of attractions model, where Gunning notes that the knowing wink of the

barker at the audience, accompanied by an episodic, fragmented series of attractions, creates a theatricality and temporality that marked a different spectator relationship than the absorption of identification associated with classical Hollywood cinema (“Now You See It” 4). Gunning suggests that “rather than being an involvement with narrative action or empathy with character psychology, the cinema of attractions solicits a highly conscious awareness of the film image engaging the viewer’s curiosity. The spectator does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking” (“An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 825). Because the attractions model emphasizes the novelty of cinema technology itself, instead of being drawn in by the “naturalness” of what is being conveyed, Gunning suggests that “far from credulity, it is the incredible nature of the illusion itself that renders the viewer speechless. What is displayed before the audience is less the impending speed of the train than the force of the cinematic apparatus” (“An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 822). The thrill or the shock associated with this power of the cinematic apparatus and the cinema of attractions is also alluded to in “Work of Art,” where Benjamin suggests that film has achieved, on a visceral level, what Dadaism hoped to do politically by “[turning] the artwork into a missile” (39). Bukatman takes this political potential in film one step further by suggesting that the cinema of attractions model has “something of the Brechtian alienation effect about it” (81). Although Bukatman suggestively uses this comparison to epic theater to bring Mulvey’s and Gunning’s often opposed theoretical approaches together, I can’t help but take a more pessimistic view. Apart from Lumière’s *Arrival of a Train at the Station* alluded to in “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” the majority of Gunning’s examples rely upon the spectacularization of women’s bodies—in Mulvey’s terms, their “to-be-looked-at-ness.”³⁶ In an epic theater model, the shock that jolts the spectator from

36 In “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” Gunning refers to *The Bride Retires* (1902), where a wife undresses behind a screen as her new husband watches her through a peephole, and *The*

complacency and leads them to a mode of critique should direct them to a critique of the ideology that facilitates the availability of women's bodies in patriarchal culture. Instead, by appreciating "the force of the cinematic apparatus" itself, the spectator in the cinema of attractions model might experience a reinforced sense of mastery, praising the triumphs of innovation and technology rather than questioning the position of women as objects (even knowing, winking objects) of the spectator's look. Even if this model avoids the fetishistic disavowal of Metz's cinephile spectator of narrative cinema, it does not divest the spectator from a feeling of sovereignty—a sovereignty that, even if it does not derive from identification with and pleasure from sexism and racism, still profits from the spectacularization of women's bodies.

Taking into account Mulvey and hooks's valuable warnings against drinking the Kool aid of Hollywood ideology—a distrust of cinema that Barthes himself may have shared—and the way that awareness of the power of the cinematic apparatus might lead to a feeling of mastery rather than unbecoming, I return, as an alternative, to how Barthes describes his process of viewing, i.e. that he feels "irresponsible," "soft, limp," and even "disjointed" (*Rustle* 345); like an "animal"; that he is behaving like "children" by sitting so close to the screen (*Rustle* 348). These unbecoming feelings, while not as dramatic as the self-shattering of *jouissance*, have sent him into a reverie that has sapped his mind and body of a sense of their own sovereignty and coherence. Indeed, as Duncan theorizes in her article on *Crash* that troubles valuations and binarizations of depth over surface or rough over glossy, fascination; similar to Barthes's

Gay Shoe Clerk (1903), where the attraction is the technology of the close-up shot, revealing a woman's ankle. In "Now You See It, Now You Don't," Gunning describes *What Happened on Twenty Third Street, New York City* (1901) as depicting a woman's skirt flying up at a street corner near the Flatiron Building, where it was popularly known that gusts of wind presented opportunities for passersby to catch chance glimpses of women's ankles and legs (8-9). Gunning does acknowledge Judith Mayne's powerful argument about how this film presents an example of film "moving toward a narrativization of the display of the female body," but his argument focuses on the technology and temporality of early cinema ("Now You See It" 9). This is not to fault Gunning's approach or accuse it of being misogynistic; rather, it is to show how the cinema of attractions does not get us out of the trap of cinema reproducing and reinforcing dominant racist and sexist ideology, as Mulvey and hooks have shown.

feelings of being captivated, hypnotized, or transfixed; is frequently dismissed as an “inauthentic or ‘zombie’ emotion,” one associated with passivity and stasis rather than being moved (210).

Given that we are expected to be skeptical of dominant ideology, however, should we not also be skeptical of the devaluation of Barthes’s pleasure at the movies? As Barthes points out in *Le plaisir du texte*:

No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion.... Pleasure is continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favor of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle, Joy, etc. (Miller translation 57)

The “use value” of pleasure, a paradoxical concept in itself, is that it resists the moralizing impulses of “stronger” values that are unquestioningly taken as good—“Truth,” “Progress,” “Struggle,” etc. Pleasure “can embarrass the text’s return to morality, to truth: to the morality of truth: it is an oblique, a drag anchor, so to speak, without which the theory of the text would revert to a centered system, a philosophy of meaning” (Barthes, Miller translation 64-65).

Barthes suggests here that pleasure creates space for the text to resist systematicity and epistemology. In other words, in some cases, pleasure’s resistance to a philosophy of meaning makes it unbecoming in a way similar to materiality.

Barthes’s description of pleasure quoted above, and the way he braids pleasure with *jouissance* in *The Pleasure of the Text*, troubles the binaries of pleasure/materiality, absorption/critique, and even hypnosis/agency. As an antidote to the delicious but irresponsible hypnosis of absorption that at the same time resists the moralizing suspicion of pleasure championed by “the discourse of counter-ideology,” Barthes suggests a third option,

another way of going to the movies ... by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings—as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theater, leaving the hall; in short, in order to distance, in order to ‘take off,’ I complicate a ‘relation’ by a ‘situation.’ What I use to distance myself from the image—that, ultimately, is what fascinates me: I am hypnotized by a distance; and this distance is not critical (intellectual); it is, one might say, an amorous distance. (*Rustle* 349)

Against Metz’s cinephile fetishist, who gets his perverse jouissance by taking pleasure in the enchantment of the cinema but *knowing* how that pleasure is incited, and instead of hooks’s “pleasure of interrogation,” Barthes proposes another kind of spectator, one who is fascinated not by a critical distance but by an “amorous distance.” By switching from epistemology to erotics in this two bodied-enjoyment, Barthes posits a jouissance that is based in the spectator’s experience of watching the film rather than the spectator’s relation to the film. Instead of subjects, Barthes proposes bodies; instead of a system of meaning, he revels in materiality.

But how to implement this amorous distance when the films I’m reading here have long been out of movie theaters—indeed, when movie theaters now are less a space of erotic play than a space where breathing itself is anxiety-inducing? In the age of the ubiquitous “Netflix and chill,” have Barthes’s two bodies gone the way of Laserdiscs and dinosaurs? And is the pursuit of some sort of portable, universal spectator position even viable? Since Watts suggests that “Leaving the Movie Theater” marks a turn away from the what he calls “the overreaching universalizing gestures of Paris School apparatus theory,” writing about this same essay in a

prescriptive way would seem to defeat its purpose (67). And even if we wanted to, the difficulty of determining an equivalent to Barthes's two bodies is apparent when reading a smattering of criticism around a film like *Under the Skin*. In terms of moving the film from epistemology to erotics, Osterweil admits, "I have never before so identified with a female protagonist in a feature film. Watching Scarlett Johansson's character gaze with impunity at the men she pursues, I remember what it feels like to experience the world through a lens of uninhibited sexual desire...Through her, I recall the pleasure of imagining random strangers, however oddly comported, as lovers" (47). Osterweil, in other words, complicates her relation to Johansson with a situation of her own. Another critic, Alicia Byrnes, writing on embodiment and the documentary style used in *Under the Skin*, suggests that "the film's interest in realism undercuts our awareness of Johansson's iconography, and in turn reinscribes her lived body" (29). This reading suggests the materiality of Barthes's two bodies and *écriture à haute voix*. On the other hand, Byrnes later writes that, through this documentary style of hidden cameras in the cruising scenes, "we view humanity from a predatory perspective that begets identification with our like, and so renders her mission existentially charged" (31). While Osterweil confesses an intense and fulfilling identification with Johansson's alien, Byrnes insists on the opposite sensation in response to the exact same scenes. As hooks might remind us, assuming a spectator's response can exclude important categories such as race and gender, sexuality and ability, and even outside of identity categories, predispositions toward feeling alien or not! Even though these critics are both writing about *Under the Skin* from a feminist lens, each claims a position of polar opposite identification.

Instead of looking extradiegetically for an example of an amorous distance, then, I turn to the moments, like the opening reading of this chapter, where film engages with its own

materiality by creating its own split, or “clivage,” as Barthes might say. As Barthes uses the term in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “clivage” allows a reader to experience both pleasure and jouissance, fascination and boredom, the seductive verisimilitude of an absorbing narrative and “the shock of discontinuity and the encounter with nonknowledge” (Berlant and Edelman 4). *Under the Skin*, for example, straddles glossy, hyperreal scenes filmed in the Black Room and quotidian scenes filmed with hidden cameras depicting the alien protagonist cruising the streets of Glasgow. In fact, many of the scenes of Johansson’s character trawling for prey were unscripted and filmed without the men’s prior knowledge (Byrnes 31). As Byrnes notes, these scenes, and many of the scenes shot on the streets of Glasgow, have a “realistic,” documentary-feel. The use of Scarlett Johansson adds to this reality television effect: despite her weird wig, somewhat unconvincing British accent, and cheap fur coat, she looks decidedly out of place in the streets of Glasgow—we’re almost waiting for someone to recognize her or to ask if this is a prank. Through close readings of examples of each of these types of scenes, we can see how *Under the Skin* both breaks the spell of cinema’s “naturalness” and at the same time makes a space for visual pleasure. While the scenes depicting the jouissance of seduction and bodily dissolution operate under a rubric of cinematic pleasure, the banality of the “documentary-style,” hidden camera scenes might produce the boredom that is jouissance seen from the shores of pleasure. Despite the lure of the lush, cinematic sequences in the Black Room, the way these scenes show the imbrication of pleasure and jouissance puts pressure on an assumed contradiction between pleasure and materiality or a necessary collusion between pleasure and knowledge.

In one of the hidden-camera sequences, Johansson’s alien buys her fake fur coat while the camera follows her through a mall as she performs banal, quotidian tasks. Lit by diffuse fluorescent light and accompanied by only ambient sound, Johansson wanders through the space,

running her fingers through bristly fake fur and examining cheap high-heeled booties. Despite her movie star status, neither her nor the goods look glamorous. The sequence has been stripped of cinematic techniques that might cathect Barthes's viewer to the screen: we are denied a seductive close-up of the movie star's face.³⁷ Even when the alien picks out make-up, her body is angled slightly away from the camera and her wig obscures a full look at her profile. The only close ups of faces in this sequence depict everyday women getting made up at beauty counters, and those moments are shot in the same eerie, unflattering light of the mall. While this insistence on denying Johansson's face to the audience might instead represent a kind of seductive, mysterious lack, the absence of correspondingly mysterious lighting or sound renders the scene more boring than enticing. Consequently, the scene is both prosaic and deeply weird, since it depicts a conventional mall setting but through the lens of an alien played by the highest paid actresses in Hollywood who is also considered one of the sexiest women in the world. This moment in *Under the Skin* marks a gap between expectations of what sort of affect the scene might produce and the actual result: by combining two massively fetishized objects—consumer goods and a female movie star—the scene should be hypnotic and engrossing; compare it, for example, to scenes of beautiful women and extravagant gift giving in the recent box office hit, *Hustlers* (2019). Instead, the combination of documentary-style, hidden camera work and the banality of the mise-en-scène result in a scene that is deliberately unexciting. As in *Crash*, which makes both the mechanicity of the film's articulation and the mechanicity of sex itself visible, in

37 In "The Face of Garbo," Barthes asserts, "Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh" (536). While some might equally argue that denying a glimpse of Johansson's face generates an air of seductive and fascinating mystery, a close-up of the face of a beautiful woman could also act to generate the kind of absorption Barthes describes in "Leaving the Movie Theater." By denying us that close-up, the film signals that it is not delivering the glossy, old Hollywood glamour that disavowed the materiality of film production through the fetish of a female film star's beautiful face.

this mall sequence, *Under the Skin* layers fetish objects desaturated of affect to show femininity's construction through the film's production.

The scenes in the Black Room in *Under the Skin*, by contrast, are deliberately lush, glossy, and engrossing: in other words, cinematic. These scenes, which take place in a seemingly infinite, mirrorlike space, are both hyperrealistic and painterly, employing all of the technical tricks for cinematic verisimilitude to portray impossible science fiction spaces and using lighting with such dramatic areas of light and shadow that they recall paintings by Caravaggio. A combination between the hypnotizing camera movement, which switches between following Johansson's alien closely from behind and showing the zombie-like men in frontal, medium shots, and the dramatic lighting and eerie score makes these scenes enthralling. This fascination draws the viewer in through both Barthes's "glue" of "naturalness" and the seduction of Johansson's alien glamour (*Rustle* 348). Although the film isn't depicting scenes that are plausible in real life, the power of film as representation has suppressed the materiality of its signifying process. As a result, these scenes in the Black Room feature what appears to be a seamless production of meaning with no speck of materiality to mar the effect, the film's "signified and its signifier melted together" (Barthes, *Rustle* 348). Although the scenes depict actions related to jouissance and bodies, previously related to the interruptions of materiality, the mechanicity of filmmaking seems to be covered over by the seduction of the sequence's glossy naturalness, producing an experience of unadulterated visual pleasure.

Despite the slick functioning of the cinematic machine in the Black Room, these scenes still exist in the context of the rest of the film. Like classical cinema's lingering close-ups of women's faces or legs that, even though they slow the narrative, are dialectically folded back into the narrative, these scenes within the Black Room are sandwiched between perplexing

documentary-style scenes like the one filmed in the mall. In this case, however, instead of reinforcing the narrative, as Mulvey might suggest, these scenes operate more in terms of the disruptive potential of spectacle pointed out by Bukatman: “Spectacle, by actively *disrupting* narrative coherence, *threatens* the stability of the narrative system” (75, emphasis in original). Taken together, these two styles work to show that although materiality in the scenes of visual pleasure is obscured, our absorption is interrupted by hidden camera scenes that alert the audience, through their “documentary-feel,” to the materiality of the film’s production. This flicker between documentary realism and glossy verisimilitude allows space for both “a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror” and the “perverse body” of materiality, which interrupts the engulfing mirror of the cinematic representation (Barthes, *Rustle* 349). The documentary style scenes give the perverse body to the Black Room scenes, which enables materiality and visual pleasure to coexist.

What’s more, the two different modes demonstrate again how jouissance and pleasure are both imbricated and, in *Under the Skin*, counterintuitively reversed. Although the scenes in the Black Room represent acts of jouissance—self-shattering so powerful these men are sucked into the floor and separated from their own skin—they are also the scenes most obviously invested in producing a variation on classical Hollywood cinema’s visual pleasure. In a similar vein, the deliberately un-sexy shopping scene depicted through hidden cameras might evoke the boredom that is associated with jouissance and certainly makes visible the film’s production. This bifurcated style produces its own narrative interruptions, cleaving itself in two and shuttling the audience back and forth between visual pleasure/jouissance until the two are intertwined. By showing the imbrication of pleasure with jouissance, *Under the Skin* shatters expectations around visual pleasure just as Johansson’s hapless prey are shattered in the hypnotic sequences in the

Black Room. This reading gives us a way out of certain counter-ideologies, such as Mulvey's, which are based on stripping away the film's naturalness in service of giving the spectator power to determine meaning/knowledge through critique. It might also counter certain assumptions based on Gunning's model of the cinema of attractions, where Gunning suggests that attractions still remain embedded within classical cinema and produce thrill and shock in a challenge to the smooth functioning of narrative ("Now You See It" 4). In *Under the Skin*, it is the scenes in the Black Room that work as spectacle, dazzling the audience with their subtle special effects and Johansson's hypnotic striptease. Instead of these scenes jolting the audience out of the narrative into a knowledge of the cinematic apparatus, however, it is the dialectical movement between these hypnotic scenes and the banal documentary-style camera scenes that undoes narrative absorption. In this formulation facilitated by *Under the Skin*, the unbecoming quality of pleasure—in its allergy to value systems and refusal to be categorizable as definitely a component of jouissance or not jouissance—allows for a mode of resistance to the lures of both narrative and knowledge. In other words, Barthes's amorous distance, and the split viewer of *Under the Skin*, doesn't assume a correct mode of ideological response: this mode of viewing provides a counter without a counter-ideology.

An attentive reader might notice that in this chapter, I seem to have taken a departure from some of my dissertation's key concerns: in foregrounding this conversation in film studies, I appear to have set aside conversations in queer theory. By returning to the central stakes of this chapter, however, I hope to trace some continuity. In this chapter, I've been using materiality as the antiadhesive that unglues any attempt to create fixed meaning or narrative. But why value resistance to narrative in the first place? Unlike Gunning, whose resistance to narrative is based

in the historical stakes of film studies, which he claims had miscategorized the goals and trajectory of early cinema, I do not have a historical or generic error to rectify. Instead, my dissertation's central term, *unbecoming*, describes the process of undoing narrative, especially narratives of growing up; my project owes this skepticism of normative narrative teleology to queer theory. For example, in *Bringing out Roland Barthes*, D.A. Miller uses the phrase "gay fabulation" to group Barthes among writers such as André Gide and Marcel Proust, whom he credits with, respectively, "inaugurat[ing] the whole twentieth-century interrogation of narrative closure" and devoting time to exploring as characters in their own right, rather than minor characters, "subjectivities estranged from the generation of marriage plots and ... sexualities exceeding or falling short of the organization of the couple" (46). In other words, *gay style* releases texts from the stranglehold of the marriage plot, or the tendency of narrative to espouse closure and a teleology that foregrounds characters who grow into mature, sovereign, heterosexual adulthood. By bringing Barthes together with film and theory, I bring out the resistance to narrative and epistemology already embedded within those texts. In another connection between queer theory and the concerns of this chapter related to identification, Teresa de Lauretis emphasizes how queerness is allergic to identification and signification, suggesting that there are a series of "normative requirements with which fiction is expected to comply": "the unnegotiable demands of most readers, viewers, or listeners to identify and to *identify with* — to make sense of what's happening, to know who's who in the diegesis, to find some incitement to fantasy or some versions of oneself in the mirror of the text" (244, emphasis in the original). By refusing these demands, queerness might, like Barthes's "drag anchor" of pleasure, also resist a text's production of systems of meaning and indeed resist being classified in a system of meaning itself (Miller translation 65). While this chapter has focused on the ways that

unbecoming and materiality, alongside pleasure, work to undo or complicate epistemology, narrative, or the visual pleasures associated with identification, we could also see queerness working for the same aim. My final chapter seeks to bring these concerns together by taking up this resistance to narrative and applying it specifically to narratives of growing up, showing how alternatives to normative narrative teleology foreground queerness and decenter a mature, sovereign, heterosexual subject.

“Bad Mimesis”: Cuteness, Toxicity, and Unlikely Subjects



DJUNA BARNES' VAMPIRE BABY
Behal-baby!
Mouths thus merry, maturing
Madden to murder

38

Suicide

Corpse A

They brought her in, a shattered small
 Cocoon,
 With a bruised body like
 A startled moon;
 And all the subtle symphonies of her
 A twilight rune.

Corpse B

They gave her hurried shoves this way
 And that.
 Her body shock-abbreviated
 As a city cat.
 She lay out listlessly like some small mug
 Of beer gone flat.
 (35-36)

Djuna Barnes's "Vampire Baby" drawing, published in *Vanity Fair* in 1915, and her "rhythm," "Suicide," published in her 1915 chapbook, *The Book of Repulsive Women, 8 Rhythms*

and 5 Drawings, reproduced above, both exemplify Barnes's uneasy representations of femininity. Although they were not published together, the image and poem both "short circuit the apparently desirable opposition of decadence and innocence" that threads through much of Barnes's work, especially her 1936 novel, *Nightwood* (Caselli 75). In the second chapter of this dissertation, I suggested that cuteness in comics brought "kid's stuff" into intimacy with pornography; here, through Barnes's vampire baby illustration and her poem about women's corpses, cuteness rubs up against negativity again. In "Suicide," the repeated language of smallness—"a shattered small/ Cocoon" in "Corpse A"—and the comparisons to mundane objects, as in "a city cat" or a "small mug/ Of beer gone flat" infuse the women's self-inflicted deaths with smallness, vulnerability, and an offbeat charm. The rhyme of "cat" with "flat" and the series of monosyllabic words that end "Corpse B" reinforce the sense of tiny things. Similarly, the childishness of "Vampire Baby's" round cheeks and closed eyes contrasts with the baby's murderous intent expressed in the babbling rhyme below. To burnish this negativity in Barnes's uncomfortable cuteness, I pair it with the concept of the toxic. Although cuteness and toxicity might appear to be on opposite ends of the affective spectrum—cuteness is sweet, tender, and drives the perceiver to want closeness with the object, while toxicity inspires feelings of fear, contagion, and a desire to expel the object—both share a porousness in terms of subject-object relations; encounters with cuteness and toxicity trouble subjectivity and sovereignty. The women's corpses in "Suicide" show this imbrication of passivity and agency, particularly in the phrase "She lay out listlessly," where Barnes's language enacts a strange zombification, switching from describing these women's bodies as objects to be jostled and manipulated to making an inert corpse the active subject of the sentence. In this chapter, I turn to Barnes's later work, *Nightwood*, to develop this unbecoming concept of toxic cuteness or cute toxicity.

Toxicity has a corrosive impact on the boundaries of the subject. While encounters with toxicity might encourage the subject to put up stronger barriers to prevent the foreign toxin from entering or seeking to expel it, Mel Y. Chen points out that, once the toxin enters a system, “intoxication” reveals the “porousness of the body” and the contingency of the subject-object relationship (202). Chen writes,

In a schema of toxicity, likely subjects are equally likely objects...In a scene of human intoxication, ... the animacy criteria of lifeliness, subjectivity, and humanness (where the human wins) come up short against mobility and sentience (where the toxin wins). And this is before even considering what occurs in that moment and the ensuing “life” of intoxication; toxicity becomes us, we become the toxin. (203)

Chen offers an example of the “‘life’ of intoxication,” using their own experience of mercury poisoning and chemical sensitivity to describe the ensuing blur between subjects and objects, even going so far as to detail the confusion between their lover and a customer service representative or their lover and their couch. Chen recounts,

I am shocked when my lover doesn’t remember what I told “her” about my phone earlier that day, when it was actually a customer service representative on a chat page, which once again brings an animating transitivity into play. And I am shocked when her body does not reflect that I have snuggled against it earlier, when the snuggling and comforting happened in the arms and back of my couch. What body am I now in the arms of? (202)

The “interabsorbent, interporous” relationship between Chen and their couch and their couch and their lover’s body marks just one example of how their experience with intoxication alters their sense of ontological distinctions (203). Although Chen insists that the ultimate aim of their

project is affirmative, the space of toxicity is also a negating one: undoing boundaries and unbecoming the subject.

Cuteness, although it might seem in direct contrast to toxicity, is also an ambivalent affect, where the desire for greater closeness with and tenderness for the cute object is frequently accompanied by a sense of manipulation, repulsion, or even a desire to do violence to that object (squishing it or injuring it to make it even more vulnerable and cute) (Ngai 65). What's more, cuteness's emotional and ideological manipulation, the sense that the perceiver of the cute object feels coerced into an appropriate emotional response, saps the sovereignty of the subject, such that cuteness enters into the potentially unwilling subject as a toxin would. To that end, cuteness has a contagious aspect; in what Sianne Ngai calls cuteness's "bad mimesis," the cute object can infect the perceiver's language and results in babyish noises such as "cootchie cootchie coo" (68). In another reversal, cuteness's objectification can also, in turn, inspire anthropomorphization of objects, resulting in commodities such as little frog-shaped bath sponges with forward facing eyes resembling a simplified human face (Ngai 64). Similar to toxicity, cuteness's reversals impact assumptions about agency and complicate cuteness's power dynamics. While cuteness, as mobilized by the "desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening," results in "not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness," my reading of *Nightwood* highlights cuteness's "uncanny reversal": its tendency to personify the cute object even as it saps the agency of the perceiving subject through a disarticulation of their speech (Ngai 3, 87).

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I used unbecoming to explore a relationship between language and sex and movement between subject and object positions. This relationship to sex shifted in my second chapter to reflect how the history of comics' cultural reception

brought together “kid stuff” and pornography, using cuteness as a way of conceptualizing an uneasy reception of the medium (even as comics, and graphic novels in particular, have gained scholarly and critical traction). Unbecoming has always had a relationship with meaning and narrative, and my third chapter picks up this thread, using film and theory to show how attempts to create meaning and narrative are thwarted by different types of materiality. In this final chapter, I rethink unbecoming through cuteness and toxicity in order to bring out the specific subject-object relationship that formed a crucial part of my first chapter. Key to this subject-object relationship is Ngai’s concept of “bad mimesis”: how cuteness prompts an involuntary imitative response in the language of the subject who perceives the object as cute. Chen’s concept of “intoxication” shares this infectious imbrication of the “subject” with the “object,” generating tricky reversals of passivity and agency. Following Ngai and Chen, I expand the suggestive term of “bad mimesis” to think about instances where blurry divisions between subjects and objects not only trouble those categories but also the very production of meaning through language. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, mimesis is “the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art, literature, etc.” As my dissertation has shown, however, the representational quality of mimesis might be less straightforwardly imitative, and more negative, than this dictionary definition suggests. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on an unbecoming quality inherent in language and mimesis alike that both produces meaning and resists normative representation. By adding the erotic power dynamic of cuteness’s “bad mimesis,” my interpretation of this term through *Nightwood* comprises not only cuteness’s contagion, but also other examples of linguistic collapse: failures of representation to maintain sufficient distance from the thing represented or even a subject’s inability to distinguish between itself and its objects.

Throughout my dissertation, unbecoming has interacted with various definitions of queerness, and this chapter is no exception. The erotic aspect to cuteness has both conceptual and formal connections with queerness; Ngai notes, quoting Lori Merish's article on Shirley Temple's cuteness, that "if cuteness is a 'realm of erotic regulation (the containment of child sexuality) that offers "protection" from violence and exploitation' (189), it is clearly also a way of bringing that sexuality out" (60). In other words, cuteness operates by a logic of closeting, where the device designed to contain and conceal sexuality simultaneously provides a method for displaying it covertly. Chen connects toxicity with queerness as well: "Queerness and toxicity—have an affinity. They truck with negativity, marginality, and subject-object confusions; they have, arguably, an affective intensity; they challenge heteronormative understandings of intimacy. Both have gotten under the skin" (207). The same sense of "getting under the skin" also applies to cuteness, through the desire for an ever more intimate relation, a smothering too-closeness. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant develop a cute-adjacent category they call the "queer adorable" as an unlikely candidate for representations of sex without optimism—sex that doesn't recuperate or redeem the negative, sovereignty-troubling aspects of sex (xiv). In examples of chat room scat play and a cartoon donkey sleepily eager to be erased from the anus up, Berlant and Edelman explore representations of sex that don't seek to negate its self-shattering negativity. Although both of their examples of sex without optimism draw from the queer adorable repertoire, Edelman warns that cuteness operates dialectically—making space for negativity but always at the price of a reversal into domestication.

In *No Future*, Edelman provides a clear example of how cuteness can be mobilized to defang and domesticate logics of sexism and heterosexuality that might otherwise be perceived as crass and objectifying. In a commercial for a diet drink that is one of Tippi Hedren's first TV

appearances, Hedren's character huffily responds to a "wolf-whistle" only to discover that the person who has whistled is a little boy (in fact, as Edelman points out, Hedren's character's own son); abruptly, the wolf turns into a puppy (127-129). Hedren's outrage diffuses and becomes good-natured laughter: how could she be angry with her precocious offspring? Hedren's response shows how cuteness can sugarcoat. While the scene depicts a boy learning sexism and mastery, Hedren (and presumably the commercial's audience) can't help but be charmed by the boy all the same (Edelman 129). Cuteness's unequal power dynamics even suggest that Hedren's laugh at her son's little joke is patronizing, while in reality the male child is dressing up in his father's clothes, experimenting with the power over women he will assume when he grows up. In *Nightwood*, however, cuteness is harnessed in service of a different beast. Instead of concealing mastery, as the commercial's narrative of a child growing into toxic masculinity does, cuteness in *Nightwood* subverts it, making space for a non-reproductive, unruly sexuality and subjectivity. Although this example shows how cuteness already contains or domesticates the toxic, toxicity can also amplify the negativity and queerness in cuteness as exemplified in concepts like the "queer adorable." I propose for *Nightwood* a toxic cuteness or a cute toxicity in order to emphasize the character of subject-object relationships in *Nightwood* and the novel's unbecoming corrosion of sovereignty.

Nightwood, and Djuna Barnes's oeuvre more broadly, have long been enshrined in the queer canon, despite their uneasy representations of sexuality.³⁹ Recent queer scholarship from Teresa de Lauretis, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Michael Davidson, Brian Glavey, and Elizabeth Freeman investigates the ways *Nightwood* portrays sexuality, the queer child, male pregnancy,

³⁹ In "'My History, Finally Invented': *Nightwood* and Its Publics," Laura K. Wallace argues for *Nightwood*'s role in shaping queer worldmaking and publics through its place in the queer canon.

and the sacrament, among other topics.⁴⁰ While Davidson, Glavey, and Freeman react against the anti-social turn in queer theory to assert, in different ways, that although *Nightwood* seems awfully negative, it also, in Freeman's words, "contests present-day theoretical configurations of queerness as radical negativity," I instead assert that *Nightwood* presents a model of negativity that is non-reproductive and in opposition to sovereignty and the subject (740). Where Freeman sees alternatives to sovereign individuality in the sociality of the queer sacrament, I instead see a dissolution of the subject that makes any type of sociality impossible. Counterintuitively, I locate this non-sovereignty precisely in the affect that seems least likely to be radically negative—the cute. By combining cuteness with toxicity, this chapter highlights the collapse between subjects and objects in *Nightwood* in order to formulate a temporality of what I call "going down" rather than "growing up"—the backwards timeline that invests in a kind of perverse childishness as a counter to developing into mature, sovereign personhood.

"Going down" is most obviously drawn from the interaction between Robin—one of the novel's central characters and Nora's ex-lover—and Nora's dog in the infamous final chapter in *Nightwood*, "The Possessed," where the sexual connotations of a woman going down and engaging in an affectively charged encounter with her ex-lover's dog has caused many readers discomfort and confusion. Indeed, the narration explicitly initiates the encounter between Robin and the dog with the phrase, "Robin began going down" (179). "Down" is repeated three more

⁴⁰ De Lauretis uses *Nightwood* as a model for a queer text: one that says something new about sexuality, linking it specifically to the death drive. Stockton triangulates lesbianism, childhood, and the family dog through *Nightwood*, revealing how "an interval of animal" allows for the type of sideways growth she ascribes to the queer child (89). Michael Davidson writes on the possibilities the novel offers for male pregnancy and queer biofuturity. Brian Glavey writes suggestively that "if anticipating the anti-identitarian refusals of contemporary queer theory, *Nightwood* stymies any attempt to categorize or label. Queerness and modernism seem to pull the novel in equal and opposite directions" (749). Despite this initial diagnosis, Glavey insists that *Nightwood's* modernism must be read alongside its queerness. Elizabeth Freeman proposes that *Nightwood* offers a model for "queer hypersociability," where reworked religious and sacramental gestures form bonds in a queer community.

times in the paragraph that follows, insistently locating Robin on the level of the dog rather than that of her human ex-lover. By weakening the distinction between dog and woman, the “going down” in this scene also implies a turning away from human personhood itself into a different type of subjectivity. Although the final chapter is the most obvious source of this concept, *Nightwood* is littered with examples of “going down,” from the chapter titles themselves—“Bow Down,” “Go Down, Matthew”—to characters with unseemly proximity to animals, characters who find their pleasures in the proverbial (or in this case, sometimes literal) gutter, or characters who collapse the distinction between mother and child. Stockton, who argues compellingly for a reading of *Nightwood* in relation to temporality, metaphor, and the queer child, uses the term “sideways growth” in order to theorize for the queer child a queer, lateral-oriented alternative to growing up (11). My concept of “going down” shares many qualities with Stockton’s “sideways growth”—an unwillingness to participate in heterosexual adulthood, a certain backwards temporality, and an investment in delay—but for my reading of *Nightwood*, Stockton’s emphasis on growth—“a matter of extension, vigor, and volume”—even a non-reproductive growth based in deferral and delay, marks the greatest deviation between the two formulations (11). Even as *Nightwood* also provides an alternative to growing up, the novel’s repeated emphasis on “down,” its insistent references to decay, and its saturation of cuteness with toxicity are not about growth, but about dissolution and unbecoming.

In addition to its resistance to the teleology of traditional narrative or Bildungsroman, *Nightwood* also troubles modes of representation that rely on the division between inside and outside. This border trouble should come as no surprise in the context of cuteness and toxicity, where subjects and objects, people and things, are interporous. This inside-out-ness might be what gives some readers of *Nightwood* the paradoxical sensations of a novel both deeply

immersive but impersonal, capturing the experience of reading intimately, as in a dream playing out inside someone's head, and also at a remove, as in a series of flat, distanced, and opaque tableaux. Jeanette Winterson captures this contradiction in her preface, writing that "*Nightwood* is itself. It is its own created world, exotic and strange, and reading it is like drinking wine with a pearl dissolving in the glass. You have taken in more than you know, and it will go on doing its work. From now on, a part of you is pearl-lined" (ix). First, Winterson asserts that *Nightwood* is a world in and of itself: contained, layerless, impenetrable. But within the same sentence, she describes the process of reading it as "drinking wine with a pearl dissolving in the glass." Now *Nightwood* is no longer a self-contained, autonomous work of art, but something dissolving, shedding itself into the wine that the reader consumes. In Winterson's description of reading, the novel goes from being all outside, "its own created world," into being inside the reader.

This border trouble and ambivalence of the novel is reflected in its critical reception. Despite its place in the queer canon, *Nightwood* has been dismissed by some queer critics as a "decadent text," too invested in "degeneracy" and not invested enough in "reach[ing] toward anything like a 'community' that outpaces the hostile language of inversion" (Christopher Nealon qtd. in Wallace 78). At the same time, it has also been used by queer readers to "covertly announce their lesbian tendencies"; Laura K. Wallace opens her article on *Nightwood* with an anecdote about how Susan Sontag's lover, Harriet Sohmers, used a copy of the book to pick up Sontag in a bookstore—"Have you read this?" (72). The ways the novel might be read as emphasizing the outdated, potentially homophobic structure of inversion even as it also serves as a way of building queer intimacy and scaffolding queer pleasures is also reflected in Stockton's reading of the "political allegory" of *Nightwood*, where she suggests that "in being so *inventive* in her grudge against her former lover, [Thelma Wood, the inspiration for Robin], Barnes ...

fashions a dazzling political swipe against what blocks a lateral growth” (107). For Stockton, Barnes’s viciousness in *Nightwood*, designed to avenge herself against her former lover, Thelma, also works to fashion a place for the queer child and lesbian relationships through the metaphor of the dog. This double-edge to the novel—the ways that it both condemns queer relationships and also creates the conditions of their possibility—might explain why many critics produce readings of *Nightwood* that are less resolutely negative than my own. But this is what negativity and unbecoming do: create the conditions of possibility for the thing that they simultaneously undo. This ambivalence is also why *Nightwood* is so well-suited to a cute-inflected reading, where cuteness brings out both the tenderness of Barnes’s failed relationship and its abjection or “degeneracy.” As Berlant and Edelman show through their deployment of the “queer adorable,” this aesthetic is particularly effective for challenging certain configurations or narratives of domesticity—such as normative conceptions of sex, heterosexuality, the family, or “growing up”—because of cuteness’s intimacy with both domesticity and the abject. Cuteness’s ability to sugarcoat or domesticate normative nastiness gives it a closeness with both the nasty and the domestic that allows it to bring out unseemly aspects of normativity, even as it can also conceal them. In amplifying the toxicity in cuteness, my reading of *Nightwood* uncovers alternatives to normative narratives of heterosexuality, domesticity, and growth.

To explore this notion of toxic cuteness, I will begin by showing how cuteness and toxicity are exemplified in two characters, Jenny Petherbridge and Robin Vote. This leads to a monstrous collapse between female adulthood and childishness that generates an unbecoming subjectivity, where interiority is either cluttered with borrowed furnishings or subjectivity is crystallized around a hollow core. In order to elaborate further this unbecoming subjectivity, I will read the controversial concluding scene of *Nightwood* that puts Robin into a state of

intimacy with her former lover's dog. In both of these sections, I read kaleidoscopic variations on "bad mimesis" as a symptom of this synthesis of toxicity and cuteness that puts pressure on ideas of sovereignty by presenting, in the form of "going down," a radically negative, erotic alternative to growing up. Some might see this chapter's emphasis on negativity as turning away from political potential in *Nightwood*—especially as a refutation of its ability to generate queer community or sociality. As Berlant and Edelman put it, "The historic practice of LGBTQ studies has been toward reclaiming and repairing lost histories and ongoing practices of delegitimation. Negativity as a source for social theory tends to reject the impulses to repair social relations that appear to us irreparable, and in that light, our work might seem quietistic, apolitical, nihilist, defeatist, or even irresponsible" (xii). Berlant and Edelman go on to insist upon "negativity's central role in any antinormative politics," a goal my project certainly shares (xii). In the spirit of unbecoming, however, I want to linger on the word "irresponsible." My dissertation has consistently evinced a skepticism about words urging us toward, as Edelman writes in his afterward to *Sex, or the Unbearable*, "what we take as an a priori good" (120). "Irresponsible," which is also how Barthes describes feeling when leaving the movie theater, evokes the childishness I suggest that *Nightwood*'s adult characters display. Through these characters, this chapter cultivates an unbecoming way to counter hegemonic, normalizing scripts of mature, individual, civically responsible, earnestly reproductive, sovereign subjects. *Nightwood* provides the perfect breeding ground for this perverse, backwards cultivation.

Intoxicated cuteness

"She has the strength of an incomplete accident—one is always waiting for the rest of it, for the last impurity that will make the whole; she was born at the point of death, but, unfortunately, she will not age into youth—which is a grave mistake of nature. How more tidy had it been to have

been born old and have aged into a child, brought finally to the brink, not of the grave, but of the womb" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 105)

Many readers and scholars might find a reading of *Nightwood* as cute at best unconvincing and at worst deliberately perverse. Scholarship on the novel ranges from those describing it as abject, obscene, or beastly—none of which seem to coincide with cuteness's associated affects of tenderness, intimacy, or care.⁴¹ Reading characters in *Nightwood* as cute, alongside a reading of characters as toxic, however, generates a way of thinking about cuteness that is not only a domestication of the negativity of sex or a palatable representation of patriarchy's toxicity, as Edelman warns, but also a way of dwelling in the negative zone of unbecoming and nonsovereignty in spite of cuteness's dialectical reversal of domestication. These paired lenses, the cute and the toxic, shed light on how cuteness operates in *Nightwood* by calling attention to this ambivalence that is made possible, but mostly obscured, by cuteness's vulnerable, tender surface. In particular, reading Jenny Petherbridge, the woman who steals Robin from Nora, as cute shows cuteness's monstrous collapse of the mother and child into one figure, revealing how cuteness can work against normativity instead of exclusively aestheticizing and sugar coating its toxicity. Reading Robin, Jenny's mistress, as toxic, further elaborates on the figure of the woman-child but with even more emphasis on a non-sovereign alternative to interiority.

⁴¹ Jane Marcus links the "distant and detached" quality of *Nightwood* to its abjection: "the doctor's multi-voiced stories of abjection" push the reader away from an intimate relationship with a single, recognizable narrator, but the narrator's obvious dislike for "Jenny, ... the most abject character" consolidates the narrative voice around a specific desire (162). Diane Chisholm also emphasizes *Nightwood*'s tendency to the transgressive or obscene in "Obscene Modernism: *Eros Noir* and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes." Carrie Rohman asserts that *Nightwood* "privileges the 'beastly'" and "associates traditional humanist forms of identity with alienation, disillusionment, futility, and disaster" (134). Michelle Rada suggests, in "'Dread name of love': The Perverse Aesthetics of Enjoyment as Disgust in Barnes and Beckett," that "the coincidence of a love object with an object that produces disgust or repulsion conditions the possibility for enjoyment in and of the text" (172).

Barnes's first description of Jenny evokes her as an animal and a puppet; the narrator describes her as "like a squirrel racing a wheel" and then, with reference to Punch and Judy, notes that she "had a beaked head and the body, small feeble, and ferocious, that somehow made one associate her with Judy; they did not go together" (Barnes 71). The racing squirrel is desperately ineffectual while the comparison to vicious but also beaten Judy evokes a physical incongruity: a head out of proportion to the body. As the description continues, Jenny's physical characteristics point to other cute objects, such as a vulnerable, punished child; Jenny "writhed under the necessity of being unable to wear anything becoming, being one of those panicky little women who, no matter what they put on, look like a child under penance" (Barnes 72). These qualities that Ngai and others associate with cuteness—vulnerability, childishness, big heads and small or even non-existent bodies—work to reinforce the tendency of cuteness to reduce the cute object to a state of powerlessness, objecthood, and passivity. Cuteness is also proximately linked to unbecoming through Jenny's inability to "wear anything becoming"

Even Jenny's actions are childish, uncertain, and cute. The way she moves throughout her own house is described as tentative and small: "she tiptoed," "she stopped, fluttering and febrile, before every object in the house" (72). Her speech patterns deny her ownership over her words:

The words that fell from her mouth seemed to have been lent to her; had she been forced to invent a vocabulary for herself, it would have been a vocabulary of two words, 'ah' and 'oh.' Hovering, trembling, tip-toeing, she would unwind anecdote after anecdote in a light rapid lisping voice which one always expected to change, to drop and to become the 'every day' voice; but it never did. (73)

Jenny's lisping, trembling, and high-pitched voice marks her as someone whose cuteness is an unbecoming affectation for a woman of her age and experience. But the grammar of this passage

shows something more particular about the effects of cuteness and its relation to agency.

Although this passage describes her speaking style, Jenny is not the subject who speaks in the first sentence. Her words, which fall passively from her mouth rather than being shaped or enunciated, are the grammatical subjects while Jenny appears at the end in the position of an indirect object. This passage, then, is more than just an example of a cute way of speaking. It also shows how cuteness troubles subject and object positions, making Jenny's words the subject of the sentence and Jenny herself their passive, removed, and, in every way, *indirect* object.

Since the passage above reveals how cuteness reverses the positions of subjects and objects, it should be no surprise that Barnes presents Jenny not just as an example of a cute object, but also as a collector and connoisseur of cute objects.⁴² Jenny's acquisitive nature is reflected in the title of her chapter, "The Squatter," which, referencing "squatting," or occupying a place one does not own, is Jenny's quality as someone who collects and appreciates only objects that do not belong to her. Even Barnes's title for the chapter has quotation marks around it, as if borrowing it from someone else who has said it before. A description of Jenny's house asserts that "her walls, her cupboards, her bureaux, were teeming with second-hand dealings with life. ... Someone else's marriage ring was on her finger; the photograph taken of Robin for Nora sat upon her table. The books in her library were other people's selections" (72). Jenny is as acquisitive as a magpie and prefers her things to have traces of someone else's investments. "Bad mimesis" is how she structures possessions and by extension her whole life: seeking not just to imitate others, but to borrow and claim for herself the things that make them passionate, lovable, or interesting. Cuteness is a "response to familiar, homey objects imagined as unusually responsive to the subject's desire for an ever more intimate, sensuous relation to

⁴² As Ngai claims, referencing the tendency of the perceiver of the cute object to find their language contaminated by cuteness and transformed into coos, "cuteness generates ever more cuteness" (60).

them” (Ngai 54) and Jenny shows this in spades: “She was master of the over-sweet phrase, the over-tight embrace” (Barnes 74). Jenny’s uncomfortable, smothering tendencies are exemplified in the description of her body language when she is sitting with Robin: “Jenny leaning far over the table, Robin far back, her legs thrust under her, to balance the whole backward incline of the body, and Jenny so far forward that she had to catch her small legs in the back rung of the chair, ankle out and toe in, not to pitch forward on the table” (Barnes 75).

The body language in the scene with Robin amplifies cuteness’s resonances with abjection, the ways that cuteness can both attract and repel. Ngai suggests that “cuteness activates both our empathy and our aversion” (66). This vortex of intimacy and revulsion positively vibrates in Jenny: “her head moved perceptibly with the broken arc of two instincts, recoil and advance, so that the head rocked timidly and aggressively at the same moment, giving her a slightly shuddering and expectant rhythm” (Barnes 72). Even the text itself seems to evince this rhythm, making Jenny both a vulnerable and small object that might provoke compassion or pity and a “squatter,” someone who hoards other people’s objects and vampirically feeds on the love or affection invested in these objects by others. What’s more, the monstrousness of Jenny’s cuteness reveals the ambivalent response to cuteness that Ngai notes among some of Barnes’s contemporaries; for example, Ngai uses a passage from Wyndham Lewis’s *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) to explicate cuteness’s “role in the radical breakdown of traditional familial forms like the generation, with the divide between parent and child collapsed in the figure of the monstrously childlike woman” (69). For Lewis, this self-imposed docility of the “cult of the child” is not only threatening because it is “putting our matrons into flesh-coloured tights and short skirts,” combining the mother with the daughter, but also because it leads to a feminization of the population (162). Lewis claims in “The Children of Peter Pan,” about what he diagnoses

as a contemporary refusal to grow up, that “it is the masculine mind that tends to approximate to the feminine” (166). This feminized cult of the child is further connected by Lewis to queer sexuality: “the part that male inversion, the latest child of feminism, plays in these neighboring battlefields of ... the specifically feminist battle of feminine ecstasy and ‘intuition’ against the male ‘intellect,’ is of the highest utility. It, too, is in arms against the family, with all its ‘natural’ machinery—namely of human affection and man-and-woman sexual love”⁴³ (217). In other words, despite its saccharine reputation, cuteness has the potential for threats to and subversion of normative structures like the family, heterosexuality and regulation of gender norms, and the progression of generations. Instead of domesticating negativity, cuteness for Lewis, and for Barnes in *Nightwood*, takes the domestic and makes it monstrous. Where Lewis finds these aspects of cuteness horrifying in their perceived threat to civilization itself, I instead embrace the aesthetic’s potential to destroy both the family and normalizing narratives of growing up.

Jenny operates in a sort of reversal of Barnes’s “Vampire Baby” illustration introducing this chapter. By bringing aspects of childishness into an adult woman four times widowed, she collapses childhood and motherhood into one figure. Although Lewis might find this collapse outright monstrous, the novel instead portrays it as pathetic and unbecoming. Doctor O’Connor, a gynecologist of ill-repute whose grandiose speeches lurch from prophecy to nonsense, says about Jenny, “she was born at the point of death, but, unfortunately, she will not age into youth—which is a grave mistake of nature” (105). In other words, in this figure of cuteness, Jenny is a melancholy, failed example of what I call one of *Nightwood*’s key philosophies: presenting the alternative to growing up in “going down.” But, as the doctor suggests, Jenny “will not age into

⁴³ Lewis also connects these anti-family phenomena to the animal, which will be more relevant in the reading of Robin and Nora’s dog. In “The Role of Inversion in the War on the Intellect,” Lewis opens by stating that “A sort of war of revenge on the intellect is what, for some reason, thrives in the contemporary social atmosphere. This has for effect a substitution of animal ‘creation’ for intellectual ‘creation’” (216).

youth.” She wants it too much. Most of Jenny’s characterization is around her too-muchness and her desires: her desperation and greed for other people’s passions: “She was avid and disorderly in her heart. She defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person” (74).

While Jenny defiles through her want, the essence of her character, another character with a troubled relationship to subjectivity, Robin Vote, who seems to want nothing,⁴⁴ appears to have a better chance of achieving this counterintuitive teleology of “aging into youth.”

Robin is unconscious when first introduced. And not only unconscious, but barely recognizable to the narrative as a subject. The first sentence describing her shows her uneasy relation to subjectivity:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms, and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten—left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives—half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. (38)

The structure of the sentence creates a virtuosic series of delays—nine prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and assorted similes—until we encounter “the young woman,” Robin, at the very end of the sentence. The subject and verb are inverted from their normal order in English, further reinforcing the distancing effect: this is a subject who does not behave like a subject. Even within the various delaying clauses, the verbs are frequently passive. The “unseen birds,” for example, are not singing, the “young woman” is being “faintly over-sung” by them. The “good housewives,” who ordinarily might put a cover over the birds’ cages at night, are instead indirect

⁴⁴ Although Robin’s very name contains the implication of desire and will in the sense of “vote,” we could also rearrange it to read “veto”: the affirmation of a desire that is nevertheless always in the negative.

objects in a relative clause. This passivity and delay are compounded by the slippery diction through which the figurative language seems to “intoxicate” the reality of the setting. The “confusion” of plant life might well be “profusion,” while “half-flung” refers to the young woman’s body but echoes the women draping covers over birds’ cages. This is a world where the grammatical confusion (and profusion) mimics and amplifies the ways that Robin seems somehow both unbounded and unformed.

In other words, the grammar itself seems to imitate the scene it is describing. This “bad mimesis” feels more bad than cute, however. Instead of childishness, vulnerability, or a collector’s appreciation for objects, here the tone is positively funereal: Robin’s unconscious body is described like a corpse in a crime scene. Winterson suggests that Robin is “passed out dead drunk” in this moment, and indeed Robin is frequently depicted as intoxicated throughout the novel (xi). Her late-night rambles, which cause such problems in her relationship with her first lover, Nora, depict her, hair swinging and drunk, shouting in favor of prostitutes and other characters of the night. Indeed, intoxication is a fitting way to describe Robin, since toxicity, like cuteness, troubles borders between subjects and objects and even the ability to perceive oneself as a subject in the normative sense. Chen describes the experience of toxicity first as mistaking their couch’s body for their girlfriend’s and then being unable to distinguish their own body from the material of the couch, writing that “the couch and I are interabsorbent, interporous” (203). This interporousness extends to the shift between Chen’s penetration by and then identification with the toxin: first Chen is “intoxicated” and then “toxic” (198, 202). Robin’s body is also “porous,” and her position as a subject separate from her objects is similarly troubled—from an intoxicated young woman to a toxic lover (Barnes 38).

Robin has taken on the qualities of her surrounding environment; she's not just interporous but imitative in her lack of boundaries.⁴⁵ Like the "bad mimesis" of cuteness where the perceiver of the cute objects makes cute sounds, here Robin is contaminated by the things adjacent to her. Through seeking intoxication, Robin diminishes her sovereignty and agency. When the doctor throws water on her face, it takes on the characteristics of that water; she's described in the same ways as a pond surface and then like something emerging from the depths of the pond: "A series of almost invisible shudders wrinkled her skin around her face as the water dripped from her lashes, over her mouth and on to the bed. A spasm of waking moved upward from some deep-shocked realm, and she opened her eyes. Instantly she tried to get to her feet. She said, 'I was all right,' and fell back into the pose of her annihilation" (Barnes 39). The gradual shift into her being an active subject is mediated through pronouns, which begin as possessive pronouns and then, as she wakes, emerge as subject pronouns. Notably, however, there's no linguistic comparison made between the shudders in the skin around her face and the ripples on the surface of a pond. The language avoids simile in order to collapse distinctions between a pond surface and her face: she's not like a pond; in this moment, she is a pond. The "bad mimesis" is bad, in other words, because it defies the measured, distanced expectations of imitation and representation and moves into contamination and collapse.

⁴⁵ We can read another commentary on Robin's relation to borders in the reference the passage makes to Rousseau: "Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration" (Barnes 38). "Douanier" is a French term for a customs officer, or tax and toll collector. Henri Rousseau was mockingly referred to as the "douanier" because he worked for a toll-service with gates in the city walls of Paris (Cardinal). This connection between the border-working Rousseau and the walls making their escape subtly underscores the way Barnes is playing with boundaries. The reference to Rousseau also places Robin as a kind of wild animal in one of his jungle scenes, a reference echoed by Felix, Robin's husband-to-be, who sees in her eyes "the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye" (Barnes 41).

A toxic affect is evoked most clearly here through descriptions of Robin in her closeness with morbidity and decomposition. As the description continues, her flesh blends into, or gets confused with, the potted plants and other greenery in her room—“her flesh was the texture of plant life” (38)—which evokes the opening, describing her as “surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms, and cut flowers” (37). This plant-flesh is not necessarily only lively, however; “The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi,” connecting Robin to the posthumous rather than progression and life (38). Robin is compared to a weather-beaten statue, with the implication that decomposition rather than growth has given her shape: “She was gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolizes the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons” (45). While decay is part of the normatively conceptualized cycle of growth, Robin’s premature decomposition here evokes a sense of growing backwards. Instead of growing into her shape through accretion, progressing from a weak, soft-edged child into a more defined, sovereign adult, this passage suggests that Robin is a product of a reversal, where she has regressed from a clearly articulated form into shapelessness.

The emphasis on decomposition in the passage above might appear to contradict my suggestion that Robin embodies *Nightwood*’s ethos of unbecoming, of “going down” rather than growing up. Indeed, Robin does go through certain narrative stages of growth, including marriage and childbirth. But the difficulty of establishing herself as a sovereign, normative adult presents itself even during the birth of her child: “‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, for Christ’s sake!’ she kept crying like a child who has walked into the commencement of a horror” (Barnes 52). As Robin is having a baby, she is “like a child,” collapsing the mother into the child through the monstrous figure of cuteness derided by Lewis. Robin only grows down from there; when Nora

first meets her, she's described as "a girl" (59). When Nora describes Robin later to the Doctor, she relates that "I saw her always like a tall child who had grown up the length of the infant's gown, walking and needing help and safety" (154). Nora further emphasizes Robin's childishness, recalling that

she would sit at home all day, looking out of the window or playing with her toys, trains, and animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles and soldiers... Sometimes, if she got tight by evening, 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, a look of fury on her face. (156)

This final passage ties the many threads of this section together, bringing together Robin's queerness in her "boy's clothes" with her intoxication and the cuteness of her childlike occupations. What's more, Nora emphasizes the radical negativity present when all these qualities combine, relating a story where Robin resists normative adulthood by wearing boy's clothes and threatening the doll, "our child," a stand-in for a reproductive culmination of their relationship.

How do we describe the subjectivity of these characters whose subject positions slide so easily into object positions? In both Jenny and Robin there is not only a temporal confusion, a desire or a tendency to grow backwards, but also an interior/exterior confusion reflected in the way I've been repurposing Ngai's term "bad mimesis." Walter Benjamin provides a suggestive formulation of what such a subjectivity might look like in "Dream Kitsch": "in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior... a creature who deserves the name of 'furnished man'" (5). In both

characterizations of Robin and Jenny, the “world of things advances on the human being,” such that Jenny is an obsessive collector and viewers cannot distinguish Robin from her interior design. But here we might think of the two characters diverging. Jenny’s obsession with other people’s things, which stands in for having a personality of her own, seems to show how the world of things “fashions its figures in [her] interior”; a “furnished [wo]man,” with its excessive quotation marks, might be another way to express “squatter.” In other words, Jenny’s “passion to be a person” furnishes her with an interior, albeit one full of things belonging to others (Barnes 74). Robin, on the other hand, has less of an interior than a surface; she’s imbedded in the furniture rather than having furniture inside her. But Benjamin’s evocation of such a subject as “a creature,” will be highly relevant in the next section, where I show how Robin’s proximity to the beastly and the creatural illuminates her unbecoming subjectivity.

I wanna be your puppy

“Robin was outside the ‘human type’—a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin, monstrously alone...That’s why she can’t ‘put herself in another’s place,’ she herself is the only ‘position’; so she resents it when you reproach her with what she had done. She knows she is innocent because she can’t do anything in relation to anyone but herself.” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 155)

“Nora will leave that girl some day; but though those two are buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will find them both.” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 113)

As Stockton suggests regarding the final chapter of *Nightwood*, “scholars of the novel are themselves a kind of study in how to skirt a dog” (103). “The Possessed,” which ends the novel, features Robin, Jenny, and Nora back in the United States, with Robin behaving characteristically strangely. She interacts intimately and aggressively with animals, seeming to share a mutual understanding. The final scene finds her down on all fours in the chapel behind

Nora's house, teasing or baiting Nora's dog. Stockton points to critical discomfort with this scene and its sexual implications, suggesting that some scholars have dismissed the scene as a non-essential epilogue to a novel that ends with the previous chapter, while others rely on biography, arguing that although Barnes intended to paint her ex-lover, Thelma Wood,⁴⁶ negatively, the sexual innuendo was unintentional (103). Against this critical pearl-clutching, I follow queer critics such as Stockton and de Lauretis in regarding the final chapter of the novel as crucial to how sexuality is portrayed in *Nightwood*. Robin's interactions with animals, and the sexual freighting that accompanies these interactions, highlights *Nightwood's* peculiar elaboration of subjectivity as a form of bad mimesis.

One reason that Robin's final actions are so perplexing to readers is the relative paucity of free indirect discourse, denying us access to her interiority. In the beginning of the final chapter, our lack of understanding of Robin's actions aligns us with Jenny, who "did not understand anything Robin felt or did, which was more unendurable than her absence" (177). Without an omniscient narrator or dramatic irony, the reader knows just as little as Jenny: only what Robin does, not why she acts or how she feels. Unlike the language in the earlier scene where Robin becomes a pond surface, here the narration uses similes—"now she came into church as one renouncing something," "fixed in an unthinking stop as one who hears of death suddenly," "moving like a housewife come to set straight disorder in an unknown house"—as though the narrator is just as perplexed by Robin as we are and is coming up with approximations in an attempt to justify her actions (176, 177).

⁴⁶ According to Cheryl J. Plumb's introduction to *Nightwood: The original version and related drafts*, "Djuna Barnes referred to *Nightwood* as 'my life with Thelma.' ... Thelma Wood was the model for the character Robin Vote" (vii).

This limitation to our access to Robin's interior might appear to contrast with her first presentation in the novel, where she seems to ooze into her surroundings and her surroundings ooze into her. Her intoxicated state in that introduction, however, aligns with the way that the final chapter, in its lack of free indirect discourse shows her as an unconventional subject. In *Jane Austen or the Secret of Style*, D.A. Miller connects free indirect discourse to the perception of a character as a "Person." He uses the character of Miss Bates in *Emma* to discuss how Emma's "ample inner life" stands opposed to the old maid's endless stream of gossip and self-abasement (37). Miller suggests that Miss Bates occupies the same position as the homosexual in Austen; both are characters necessary to the plot only insofar as they are sidelined in order for the protagonist to flourish. About Miss Bates, he writes, "She must bear nonetheless the same unsexed appellation as Balzac's castrato. She is 'a good creature,' 'there is not a better creature in the world,' she 'thought herself a most fortunate creature' ; but she is not a woman in any sense that is interesting either to society or to a novel whose own achievement of social centrality depends on her marginalization" (36-37). But, perhaps counterintuitively, the advantage of being Miss Bates, or of being socially marginalized, is that she avoids the fate of Emma: to be brilliant and independent for almost the whole length of a novel until she is humiliated and trapped into being a "Person," in other words, a woman about to be married, suddenly dependent, suddenly dull (Miller, *Jane* 46).

Although Robin is neither particularly talkative nor provided with an ample inner life, *Nightwood* shares with *Emma* the connection between the creatural and the absence of interiority (or readerly access to it). Although Robin has been married and has had a child, she leaves that family and takes up female lovers only to throw them over too in favor of dissipated midnight rambles where her hair swings in her face (blocking the visual, bodily representation of

personhood and personality). “The Possessed” especially highlights Robin’s creatural qualities through her connection to animals, which Stockton argues is key to the queer child’s temporal resistance to the normative “realms of adulthood, coupledness, and parenthood. . . .Animal/child bondings can offer opportunities, queer as they will seem, for children’s motions inside their delay, making delay a sideways growth the child in part controls for herself, in ways confounding her parents and her future” (90). Robin’s going down rather than growing up is connected to her creatural intimacy, the way that her interactions with animals affectively surpass the absence of free indirect discourse. The lack of free indirect discourse for Robin allows her to avoid the vicissitudes of becoming what Miller would call “a Person.” But unlike the queered Miss Bates, who must be relegated to the sidelines of the novel and society, the fact that Robin gets positioned among the dregs of society does not prevent her from being a central character in *Nightwood*. Indeed, Robin’s very “creature”-like qualities are what allow her *not* to be “unsexed”; Robin’s proximity to beasts and animals is instead her access to *jouissance* (Miller, *Jane* 36). Because she is not marginalized by *Nightwood*, because she is not a minor, pitiable character who exists to teach the protagonist a lesson about compassion and responsibility—in other words, an education in becoming a Person—Robin instead allows for a glimpse of what intoxicated, cute resistance to personhood might look like.

In the same chapter where Jenny despairs of understanding why Robin does what she does, Robin is described as “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 as if her hand were upon her own neck” (177). Her imitation in this scene, the way she mirrors the animals so specifically that she seems to feel that what she is doing to them she does to herself, evokes the bad mimesis of Robin’s first appearance. There’s a similar link, or

sense of identification and recognition, between her and Nora's dog. In the final pages of the novel, Robin wanders over to a small chapel near Nora's house. As Robin sleeps in this chapel, "one night she woke up to the barking, far off, of Nora's dog. As she had frightened the woods into silence by her breathing, the barking of the dog brought her up, rigid and still" (178). Like a dog who hears another dog, or a strange sound in the middle of the night, Robin sits up, silently and stiffly on the alert. Nora's dog subsequently goes wild, reacting to Robin as if she were another animal.

In the passages that follow, access to Nora, Robin, or the dog's interiority is limited: the narration describes how Robin and the dog interact, but provides no sense of why they are behaving as they do. Whatever Robin says "in a low voice" to the animals remains concealed from the reader, and her motivation for her behavior in response to Nora's dog is similarly opaque. The last three paragraphs contain no free indirect discourse and essentially no "telling," only "showing": Barnes effectively leaves interpretation of the significance of the scene up to the reader. Certain words give clues as to the dramatic nature of what is happening—the dog is portrayed with "his hackle standing," "his tongue a stiff curving terror," in "agony," "misery" (Barnes 179). If we were to act out this scene from the description of what's happening, however, these negative words could merely indicate the intensity of the dog's play. Despite the opacity of the passage, Robin is essentially getting down and playing with the dog like a dog—going down on all fours, splaying out her front arms to imitate a dog flopping forward on its forelegs, butting her head against his head and side, barking along with him. My meaning-oriented language uses similes in order to provide an interpretation for what is happening in the scene, but Barnes offers no easily understandable comparison or explanation for Robin's actions.

In a novel where Robin can't seem to hold her shape, this moment is the culmination of her "border trouble": her mimetic tendency to imitate and "unbecome" into her surroundings.

In order to throw into relief these effects of a lack of free indirect discourse, I bring Barnes's contemporary master of free indirect discourse, Virginia Woolf, and her book, *Flush: A Biography*, a charming account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning seen through the eyes of her spaniel, Flush. In the passage below, Woolf uses extensive free indirect discourse to make felt to the reader not only Flush's disorientation, but also Elizabeth Barrett's feelings of identification and difference as she looks into his eyes. Flush shifts from the agony of being dropped off at a new person's house to the joy of meeting Elizabeth Barrett for the first time:

Then such a wave of despair and anguish overwhelmed him, the irrevocableness and implacability of fate so smote him, that he lifted up his head and howled aloud. A voice said 'Flush'. He did not hear it. 'Flush', it repeated a second time. He started. He had thought himself alone. He turned. Was there something alive in the room with him? Was there something on the sofa? In the wild hope that this being, whatever it was, might open the door, that he might still rush after Miss Mitford and find her—that this was some game of hide-and-seek such as they used to play at the greenhouse at home—Flush darted to the sofa.

'Oh, Flush!' said Miss Barrett. For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa.

Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a

likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! (26)

In the first paragraph excerpted above, we are both in Flush's mind and the larger narration. We experience firsthand his emotions and thoughts through questions—"Was there something alive in the room with him?"—but this free indirect discourse is interrupted by sentences such as, "He did not hear it," which come from an objective narratorial position. In the final paragraph the narration evokes both Flush's and Miss Barrett's thoughts, revealing how each saw the other's face as a mirror, but how they ultimately felt different. *Flush* is obviously invested in the project of being charming and produces affects clearly associated with cuteness. The name "Flush" alone carries associations with pinkness, femininity, and an involuntary but frequently charming response that points to a lack of bodily control and subsequently an imbalance of power. The writing evokes a sense of wide-eyed breathlessness through its alternation between short sentences and long sentences broken up by dashes, coupled with exclamatory statements like "Oh, Flush!" and "But how different!" The depth of Flush's feelings, in contrast to the knowledge that he is a small, silky house dog entirely powerless in the hands of Miss Barrett, Robert Browning, or the uncouth ruffians from the wrong side of the tracks who kidnap him later in the novel, might easily inspire the kind of avid, rapacious tenderness that Jenny feels for other people's things.

In contrast, the dearth of free indirect discourse in the passage between Robin and the dog in *Nightwood* produces an entirely different cognitive and affective experience. A reader might ultimately conclude that, like Miss Barrett and Flush, Robin and the dog feel a sense of kinship or recognition, but for Woolf this recognition is cognitive; for Barnes it is all external performance, as if subjectivity has been crystalized on the surface *as* performance rather than a

way of translating being into meaning. Accordingly, the depth and transparency in *Flush* is replaced by an overwhelming epistemological and affective confusion in *Nightwood*. Although I've summarized this passage earlier, I excerpt it here; reproducing the same mirroring and backward movement embodied by Robin in the novel:

At the moment Nora's body struck the wood, 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... Then, head down, dragging her forelocks in the dust, she struck against his side. (179)

Their reciprocity isn't just echoed in their movements, with the dog moving backward as Robin comes forward or the way her veins stand out and the dog's muscles quiver, but also in the language where the dog's "forelegs" is echoed in Robin's "forelocks." Instead of recognizing similarity and then admitting what Woolf calls "the widest gulf that can separate one being from another," the passage between Robin and the dog ends with the two of them reaching some sort of understanding: "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 gave up then, and lay

down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees” (Woolf 27, Barnes 180). The gulf Woolf describes as dividing Miss Barrett and Flush seems non-existent in the case of Robin and Nora’s unnamed dog. Again, the “bad mimesis” here is “bad” or a “failure” because there isn’t enough of a gap between imitation and the thing imitated to have an experience of representation. But “bad mimesis” is also where the connection to cuteness, especially affectively, ends. The degree of confusion between Robin and the dog puts this scene on the side of intoxication or the toxic. While this scene certainly delivers on the promise of toxic cuteness to provide a sustained alternative to the domestication of cuteness’s dialectical reversal, showing less of a metaphor (or simile as in the earlier passages with Robin in this section) and more of an actual metamorphosis, there’s still a sense of failure in Robin not only “[giving] up” but “weeping” rather than “crying with him.” While her intoxicated unconsciousness brought her into unbecoming, this more active transformation seems impossible to sustain.

Both Woolf and Barnes deploy versions of defamiliarization, a technique defined by the Russian Formalists as a narrative process whereby the familiar is made unfamiliar by being told from another perspective—in the paradigmatic example of Pushkin’s short story, “Kholstomer,” from the perspective of a horse. Victor Shklovsky reads this story as a way to expose social inequities assumed to be givens in Pushkin’s time, and the same impulse is at work in Woolf’s *Flush*, where the spaniel’s point of view reveals absurdities of human social hierarchies. But even as defamiliarization is connected to producing meaning in the form of social commentary, it is also associated with deliberate textual difficulty. Shklovsky in fact argues against its orientation toward meaning: “An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it, its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a vision of the object instead

of serving as a means for knowing it” (18-19). This is where defamiliarization in these novels by Woolf and Barnes diverge. Where Woolf’s portrayal of Flush remains on the level of the cognitive, Barnes takes defamiliarization a step further at the end of “The Possessed” by denying us the familiar narrative anchor of a first-person narrator or free indirect discourse. In *Nightwood*, although the negative affect and position of all the characters as *détraqués* implies a degree of social critique, the baroque sentence structure and general narrative confusion makes illegible defined, targeted social criticism, resulting in the myriad differing scholarly interpretations of the purpose or even the legitimacy of the ending. To put it another way, the intensity of Barnes’s defamiliarization, its resistance to meaning itself, undermines the novel’s effectiveness as actionable social commentary. While this defamiliarization paradox might evoke the conflict between queer critics who insist on *Nightwood*’s utility in making a political gesture toward queer community and my own reading of *Nightwood*’s opposition to personhood, sociality, and growth, it also points to bad mimesis’s radically negative politics, which trouble the smooth, normative narrative machine of meaning-making and subject formation by developing a space where both subjectivity and signification are rendered opaque and inaccessible.

Benjamin suggests in “Some Remarks on Folk Art” that “Art teaches us to look into objects. Folk art and kitsch allow us to look outward from within objects” (279). We might be tempted, then, to connect the specific work defamiliarization does in *Flush* and “Kholstomer” with the subject-reversals in cuteness and toxicity. In other words, we might think about defamiliarization as allowing us to “look outward from within objects.” But insofar as Pushkin’s horse or Woolf’s spaniel are granted interiority, they are transformed from objects into speaking

(or at least thinking) subjects. For example, Flush discovers the concept of social hierarchy by looking at the rest of the world and then looking at himself in the mirror:

There is no equality among dogs: some dogs are high dogs; some are low. Which, then, was he? No sooner had Flush got home than he examined himself carefully in the looking-glass. Heaven be praised, he was a dog of birth and breeding! His head was smooth; his eyes were prominent but not gozzled; his feet were feathered; he was the equal of the best-bred cocker in Wimpole Street. (33)

Although this isn't the traditional pattern of the mirror stage, it shares enough characteristics to hazard a claim that Flush is a subject, not an object. While the traditional mirror stage marks the point when a child sees itself as separate from the mother through an image of itself in the mirror holding itself up alone, this sense of mastery and wholeness is ultimately an illusory fiction, just as is Flush's sense of his own superiority. Even though Flush has identified himself with the top of the dog hierarchy, he is still a dog, and as he discovers later in the chapter, subject to all the indignities that entails, such as being displaced from his mistress's affections by her romance with Robert Browning.⁴⁷ Flush's defamiliarized perspective, then, cannot be properly said to be "looking out from within objects," since he is no object. *Nightwood's* more radical project withholds free indirect discourse to present new possibilities for subjects.

Other critics have noted Robin's unique subject position. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, sees our lack of access to what she calls "psychological explanations for Robin's actions" and what I would call, after Miller, a sense of Robin's "inner life," as "inscrib[ing] in the narrative the figure of sexuality as an undomesticated, unsymbolizable force, not bound to objects and beyond the purview of the ego, a figure of sexuality as, precisely, drive" (245). Where de

⁴⁷ This too mirrors a human developmental stage in its resemblance to the Oedipal triangle, where the child realizes that the mother's desire is not only directed towards them but is also monopolized by the father.

Lauretis's focus is on the way sexuality is portrayed in *Nightwood*, in particular the ways the novel delivers on her definition of a queer text by presenting something new about sexuality, I shift my focus here to subjectivity, arguing that Robin's opaque psychology is how the text presents a different mode of being a subject or of refusing subjectivity—a way to avoid becoming what Miller calls “a Person.” This lack of interiority in Robin seems coextensive with her dwelling continuously in a state “beyond the purview of the ego,” in the state of the drive, or even in the sexual encounter (de Lauretis 245). In other words, although Edelman writes that “the structuring incoherences that queer the self as the center of consciousness, and so of a pseudo-sovereignty, remain unavailable to the subject except in rare moments of traumatic encounter, moments when the potential for shock gets activated by the nearness of the unbearable,” Robin acts as though she *lives* in this state of “traumatic encounter” (Berlant and Edelman 9). This connection between Robin and the drive can also explain her “failure” to transform fully into a dog. As Lacan points out, the drive “attain[s] its satisfaction without attaining its aim”; rather than achieving what might seem to be the ultimate goal of unbecoming in becoming dog, Robin as drive instead returns to the circuit, repeating the process again (179). Both Glavey and Freeman acknowledge Robin's temporal queerness, Freeman reading Robin as the figure (or anti-figure) for Edelman's sinthomosexual and Glavey suggesting that her abandonment of her child and husband could be “a refutation of futurity itself” (Freeman 746, Glavey 758). But more than a refutation of futurity, Robin's time, to borrow Edelman's words borrowed from Hamlet, is out of joint. In going down instead of growing up, in living in the traumatic encounter, her past is continuous with her present.

A sense of this inability to separate past from present echoes through Chen's account of their experience with being toxic or experiencing intoxication. For example, in the passage

quoted earlier where Chen mistakes their lover for a customer service representative or a couch, the symptoms of Chen's mercury poisoning alter their perception of subjects and objects such that the past rewrites itself, transforming their lover into their couch (202). As previously discussed, the final scene in *Nightwood* introduces similar confusions between Robin and the dog, when sometimes only Robin's female pronouns and the dog's male pronouns allow the reader to distinguish between them. Unlike this toxic quality in *Nightwood*, *Flush* is obviously cute. The scene between Robin and the dog, at first glance, is not. The affective intensity that de Lauretis notices is in direct opposition to those associated with cuteness. Without access to Robin or the dog's interiority or motivations, without being able to determine if the scene is playful or antagonistic, however, the reader is trapped in an in-between space, "obscene and touching" (Barnes 179). The seeming contradiction between the toxic and the cute is captured in this phrase, which initially seems impossible: how could something be both pornographic and tender at the same time? But as my readings have revealed, cuteness is always a little bit obscene, and toxicity reaches out to touch you in ways you cannot anticipate.

Yet even as Chen sees the productive potential in toxicity for expanding "queer theory's attachment to certain human bodies and other human objects [that] elides from its view the queer socialities that certain other, nonhuman intimacies portend" through the concept of "transobjectivity," I can't help but feel trepidation about autobiography, about "possibilities of rejoinder, of response for those considered nonsubjects or errant subjects" as an antidote to normative hierarchies of animacy, humanness, and subjectivity (207, 212). Investing non-normative subjects, or subjects with an unbecoming intimacy with objects, with free indirect discourse or interiority might risk re-inscribing the conventional, autonomous liberal subject, with all the attendant horrors of normative expectations and the disappointing self-deception of

the mirror stage. While I don't seek to denigrate or oppose Chen's own narrative of their experience, it seems to me that a more powerful tool against normativity, a more effective way to counter normative scripts of mature, individual, sovereign subjects and the position of errant subjects those scripts exclude, is to refuse, as Barnes does for Robin, the possibility of free indirect discourse at all, to make interiority opaque and inaccessible. This, of course, is the advantage of fiction, where Robin can be a character so malleable that she seems to suffer no harm from her drunken excursions, while Chen manifestly describes an experience that, although it offers pleurably unexpected intimacies, also offers considerable difficulty, pain, and limitation of movement.⁴⁸ In this "bad mimesis," Robin can experience unbecoming in representation that leaves her able to circle back again and again. Like Ngai's "ready-at-hand example" of a child's toy bath sponge, Robin seems just as willing to endure violence as she is able to enact it on others, squishing herself into the shape of decaying fungi, beastly creatures, aggressive dogs, and drunken wretches all with the expectation that she will spring back into her own amorphous shape again (64).⁴⁹

Not words to live by

*Horrid hunger is the cause,
That opens up the Lion's jaws;
Yet what it tears apart for meat
Is merely what its victims ate.*

48 Chen's theorization of the toxic in *Animacies* also includes the importance of race and nationality, particularly in relation to lead in toys from China and white supremacist reactions on the part of the American public toward a person with an Asian appearance wearing a mask—a type of xenophobic anti-Asian racism that has only increased and gained prominence with the rise of COVID-19. This is all to say that, even as *Nightwood* is a catalogue of *détraqués*, Robin, as a white, Christian character, might have an easier time springing back from the deformations of intoxication than other, differently marked bodies.

49 Ngai even includes two images of the bath sponge, one alone and one squished by a disembodied hand (65). She writes that its "soft contours suggest pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others... The bath sponge makes this especially clear because its purpose is to be pressed against a baby's body and squished in a way guaranteed to repeatedly crush and deform its already somewhat formless face" (64).

To close this chapter, I choose a short poem, reproduced above, from Djuna Barnes's largely dismissed bestiary, *Creatures in an Alphabet*. Caselli remarks that critical responses to the collection have been largely to sideline it as a minor work intended only for children:

according to a process of recuperation of value frequently encountered by a number of twentieth-century writings, the eccentricity of most Barnes texts and of her persona are reframed as the acceptable mark of literary value at the price of keeping *Creatures in an Alphabet* firmly in place as the 'normal', 'simple', childish', 'elementary' liminality of an eccentric system. (111)

Like Miss Bates, *Creatures in an Alphabet* must be marginalized in order that *Nightwood*, *Ladies Almanack*, *Ryder*, and *The Antiphon* might stand out as acceptable literary offerings. Despite this scholarly dismissal, the actual appropriateness for children of Barnes's bestiary is dubious at best. As the fly-leaf of the 1982 Dial Press edition suggests, "it soon became clear that only a very curious child indeed would delight in her Madame Récamier seal or the hawing donkey practicing *solfeggio*." Peppared with references to William Blake and Deuteronomy and paired with poorly-reproduced grayscale medieval illustrations drawn from the Kubler Collection at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum Library Picture Collection, the New York Public Library, and Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the 1982 collection would hardly be considered "normal" or "elementary" reading for children by most readers (Caselli 110). I end with this short, cannibalistic poem from this creatural, canonically marginalized collection to reemphasize how Barnes's toxic cuteness troubles subject-object relations and produces, through the character of Robin Vote, an alternative to normative subjectivity.

As in the “Vampire Baby” illustration opening this chapter, the short poem about a Lion for the letter “L” combines a nursery-rhyme-like meter and rhyme-scheme with characteristically Barnesian negativity. The absent unstressed syllable at the beginning of the poem, in contrast to the rest of the poem’s even iambic tetrameter, evokes a breath to encourage a recited, sing-song quality. The final slant rhyme between “meat” and “ate,” however, ends the poem on a sour, unsatisfying note. With the opening two lines, we see Barnes up to her old tricks; as usual, it is not the lion opening its own jaws, but the abstract (although materially felt) concept of “horrid hunger.” The sense of displacement of agency is reinforced in the second half of the poem, where the idea of “you are what you eat” deprives the lion of ownership over its prey; instead of consuming its victim, the lion bites into “merely what its victims ate.” Instead of an instantiation of the hierarchy of the lion as the “top of the food chain,” Barnes’s “merely what its victims ate” upsets a sense of the lion as sovereign of the jungle. The inside-outside trouble alluded to in the Winterson preface to *Nightwood* echoes here, where the lion’s autonomy, its sense of being “itself” and complete, is threatened as the mere victims it consumed instead define it (ix). Moreover, this temporal displacement, the idea that the lion is biting back into the past meals of its prey, evokes the anti-teleology that I propose as animating (although not forward-propelling) Robin and Jenny in *Nightwood*.

In the spirit of this backwards teleology, I end with the passage from *Nightwood* where Robin first meets Nora, at a circus:

Then as one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl rose straight

up. Nora took her hand. “Let’s get out of here!” the girl said, and still holding her hand Nora took her out.

In the lobby Nora said, “My name is Nora Flood,” and she waited. After a pause the girl said, “I’m Robin Vote.” She looked about her distractedly. “I don’t want to be here.” But it was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be. (60)

In the opening paragraph, the depth of intimacy between Robin and the lioness is reinforced by their female pronouns, such that there’s a feeling of continuity between Robin and the lioness. Sometimes it’s difficult to tell, for example, whether the “she” who “went down” is Robin or the lioness, or whose “eyes” were tearing up. The slipperiness in the language evokes another incident of bad mimesis. Reinforcing her childishness, Robin, not yet known to Nora, is referred to as “the girl.” In contrast to her usual state of quasi-unconsciousness, this moment marks a rare moment of Robin’s assertion of her own desires: “Let’s get out of here!” As the narration points out, however, these desires are never positivized: “she did not explain where she wished to be.”

These two lions, the lion of Barnes’s poem and the lion with whom Robin has a brief moment of bad mimesis, bring together the concepts that have been circulating throughout this chapter: cuteness, toxicity, a non-agentive subjectivity, and in the case of Nora and Robin’s first encounter, triangulated through the lioness, a sense of queer eroticism tinged with negativity. As my previous section concluded, these are not words to live by; going down instead of growing up has major bodily consequences for people who live it, but is survivable for characters like Robin, who live in a continuously repeating state of unbecoming.

A third lion, or in this case, a puma, joins this final chorus of bad mimesis—here, life straining to imitate art. While researching the relationship between Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood, admittedly in an effort to find photographs of them looking glamorous or intellectual in

costumes of the time, I stumbled across a silverpoint drawing of a puma drafted by Wood in 1929. In my own intensity of attachment to the novel, and to the volatile relationship that inspired it, I imagined—seven years before *Nightwood*'s publication—Thelma composing a portrait of herself as Robin, surrounded by the lush tropical vegetation of Robin's introductory scene. The central, Robin-esque figure, a big cat from her meet-cute with Nora, lounges languidly, her eyes rolled back into her head in boredom, intoxication, or pleasure. Imagining this silverpoint of a puma as Thelma's portrait of Robin brings out her creatural quality that Barnes emphasizes in *Nightwood*. But this bad mimesis in action—the way that my interpretation of the book contaminated my perception of historical record—could also be read as opposing unbecoming by crafting a sort of autobiography or psychology for Robin through Thelma. As I leaned avidly into my computer screen, fully reproducing the desire (and the gesture) of Jenny Petherbridge hungering after the glow of other people's attachments, I projected a narrative onto Wood's work and Robin herself, potentially undoing my own reading of Robin's opaque interiority by giving her a backstory and a historical precedent.

Looking at the silverpoint itself, however, we can see elements of unbecoming at play in Wood's work that are in tension with an attempt to ascribe meaning or a narrative to the drawing. The faint silverpoint lines barely distinguish the puma from the background vegetation, while the fine lines giving texture to the puma's fur are echoed in the same hatching of the grass beneath it, evoking the interporousness of Robin's body and the room that surrounds it in her first scene in the novel. Wood's use of silverpoint also shares similarities with *Nightwood*'s "going down"; silverpoint is a medium that fell out of fashion in the 16th century (Millidge). By the 20th century, it was rarely used: Wood's deployment of this antiquated technique evokes the same backwards trajectories as *Nightwood*'s animal- and childlike characters (Millidge). In other words, Wood's

silverpoint troubles my irresponsible reading by reasserting its unbecoming against my attempts to narrativize Wood and Barnes's relationship and project it onto the novel. Instead of endowing Robin with a psychology and backstory by tracing her outline over Thelma's, my fantasy is a reminder of how representations can produce the ultimate experience in non-sovereignty: despite my readerly desire, texts get undone as they are read—made and unmade by the play of the signifier, or, in this case, the stroke of a silverpoint.



Puma, Thelma Wood, 1929, RISD Museum Collection

“The pose of her annihilation”⁵⁰

Nestled into a collection of comics by Casey Nowak, “Diana’s Electric Tongue” tells the story of a twenty-something woman who’s just suffered a bad breakup. Like Nowak’s style, this story’s near-future science fiction world is soft and somewhat whimsical; there are no flying cars or grandiose critiques of civilization, but there are cybernetic tongues, robot companions, underwater luxury hotels, and genetically modified rhubarb that grows to the size of a redwood tree. Diana, the protagonist, is a model of toxic and intoxicated cuteness—drunk, self-destructive, and unable to communicate fully the ways she has been damaged by the breakup (or the ways this previous relationship allowed her to conceal the damage she carries with her). Nowak emphasizes Diana’s volatility, her inability to express or contain herself, by giving her a malleable, expressive face and showing her leach out of the panel borders. The story begins when Diana purchases a robot boyfriend, the Harbor companion model, programmed to shape his personality based on his companion’s implicit desires. While the inclusion of Harbor’s character raises questions about the ethics of using robot people as means—not only for rebound sex, but also for companionship—the story provides a number of different perspectives on Diana and Harbor’s relationship, ultimately leaving the issue open-ended. I close this dissertation with a reading of “Diana’s Electric Tongue” because, although it might seem to plot a trajectory of healing or repair—Diana’s slow journey from a way of being that, to borrow terms from my first chapter, “doesn’t work” into one that “works”—the story brings together the many varieties of unbecoming I’ve been tracing throughout the dissertation: unbecoming through sex or relationality, comics’s formal unbecoming, alternatives to narrative closure, and intoxicated

⁵⁰ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 39

cuteness. By looking at questions raised by my first chapter through the kaleidoscope of themes from my following chapters, “Diana’s Electric Tongue” reminds us that lives that don’t “work,” experiences of non-sovereignty, aren’t necessarily tragic. Even as they might be toxic, they can also be unbearably tender.

After her breakup with former child actor and food scientist, Blue, Diana got into a car accident that severed her tongue. Its replacement, the story’s eponymous “electric tongue,” is one of the qualities that she shares with her robot, Harbor. Although the tongue is a material reminder of her painful breakup, she treats it flippantly, calling it “Kinda cool” and letting people touch it (Nowak 51). Sparks fly, literally, in her first sexual encounter with Harbor when the two tongues short circuit to deliver a small electric shock. Since Diana initiates the sex and since she is laughing, tentative, and embarrassed during the encounter, the short sex scene might not seem to model the kind of self-shattering discussed in my first chapter. But this example can be grouped with the many other moments in which Diana is depicted as intoxicated or non-sovereign because of her alignment with Harbor through the “zap” of their tongues. Even though Diana ostensibly has the power in this scene—Harbor submits willingly to the sex without being asked for consent—Diana’s tongue, when in contact with Harbor’s body, shows that her body isn’t entirely in her control.

In one of the few aesthetic shifts in the story from cuteness to horror, Diana tells Harbor about discovering that she lost her tongue. In the hospital after her accident, she tries to taste some yellow tulips left by her bedside, hoping they are from Blue. Instead of tasting like hot dogs, engineered especially for her, the flowers taste like nothing—Diana discovers that she has no tongue. The trauma of this discovery—that she has lost her tongue and, by extension, her connection to Blue—is amplified by Nowak’s color work, which here instead of being a light pink

deepens into a horrific, brilliant fuchsia as the petal drips in a gob of bloody spittle from Diana's startled, now-incomplete mouth. The yellow tulips, which also appear as an image accompanying the story's title page, reveal to Diana the loss of her bodily coherence. While this moment is shattering, it is less a shattering beyond the pleasure principle and more the physical manifestation on her body of the loss of her relationship with Blue—an encounter with her non-sovereignty through total rejection by her love object. The electric tongue only emphasizes this loss because she can't quite taste with it; one might think that with an enhanced technological appendage, Diana would be like Benjamin's dream of the human body augmented by technology, equipped with a mechanical tongue that can taste previously unimagined flavors. Instead, each glimpse of Diana's lime green tongue erupts into the pink palette (palate?) of the panels, reminding the reader of Diana's unbecoming and lack of bodily coherence.

While the technology of her electric tongue reminds Diana that she is incomplete, Harbor's robot companion technology seems to do the opposite. She takes him as her date to a friend's wedding, and he listens to her, carries her around when she is too drunk to walk, and even lifts her friend's car out of a ditch: in other words, he "completes" her. In the final scene, Diana bathes Harbor after he has sustained a small hand injury from the car rescue. In this tender moment, they rehearse elements from her previous relationship, this time with Harbor mostly repeating back to her what she has already told him about Blue. From this conversation, the reader can see how attentive Harbor has been to Diana—even though he is mostly expressionless, he has tirelessly absorbed her ex-boyfriend stories. Indeed, Harbor's robotic indifference to sovereignty prevents him from a jealous response that would transform Diana's heartbreak into something related to him. Diana's roommate and friends seem unenthusiastic about Harbor's presence in her life, assuming that he is an embarrassing sign of her loneliness or even fearing

him as dangerous, powerful technology. But in the beginning of this final scene, the reader sees how Harbor could be good for Diana—not only as someone to combat her loneliness, but also as someone empty enough to listen to her without judgement or desire. In this way, Harbor exemplifies another version of the “furnished man” model of interiority from the previous chapter. Unlike Jenny Petherbridge, however, he has no greed—he is simply programmed to fill himself based on the desires of his human companion. Diana’s use of him is made apparent in the final few pages, when she asks him to write a poem about her. Harbor responds: “Diana begins with ‘D’ / She has black hair / And skin that is almost pink / I will be with her until she doesn’t want me anymore” (115-117). The banal beginning of the poem shifts into a sad register as the final lines underscore, in Harbor’s matter-of-fact delivery, his own disposability. This poem serves as a reminder that Diana ultimately determines the shape of their relationship and of Harbor himself—another way that Harbor might make her feel complete or in control. Harbor is untiring, but Diana could tire of him at any moment.

Even as this final poem raises questions about Diana’s right to use Harbor, the comic never resolves them. A reading of the ethics of Harbor as a sexual and therapeutic object is complicated by the images that are juxtaposed with Harbor’s poem. Instead of illustrating the poem with images of Diana’s skin and hair, Nowak shows the motorcycle accident that severed her tongue. Harbor’s final line, the final line of the story—“I will be with her until she doesn’t want me anymore”—is read alongside a bloody image of that tongue, existing in the blank space of a full page in order to linger beyond the borders of a panel, visually emphasizing the story’s open-ended conclusion. Through this juxtaposition, Diana is again put into Harbor’s position—as Harbor anticipates that Diana will end their relationship, Nowak reminds the reader that Blue has moved on from Diana as well. Instead of shoring up Diana’s sovereignty, this tension between

Harbor's poem and the motorcycle images reveals the ways that Diana is just as disposable as Harbor. By reminding the reader that Harbor's use as a robot is parallel to Diana's use in her previous relationship, Nowak's story deviates from a trajectory of repair in order to present the melancholy possibility that relationality is not only what completes us, but also what undoes us and throws us away.

"Diana's Electric Tongue" could be considered a work of feminist science fiction because it queers the normative heterosexual power dynamic by substituting a male robot companion for the ubiquitous female sexbot. But even though Harbor exists to care for Diana, the story doesn't present this power reversal as an unequivocally good thing. Readers might expect this feminist interpretation to provide new parameters for robot use—that perhaps having a Harbor companion model is the only way Diana can become a "Person" without also becoming a woman for someone else—introducing an alternative to Daphne's impossible choice between being treated like a thing or becoming a thing alluded to in my introduction. But through this reading of the short comics story, I show how what could be a straightforward feminist revision of a tired sci-fi trope actually displays unbecoming at work. Even when, through his anodyne poem, Harbor most insists on his non-personhood, the narrative emphasizes that Diana has also been thrown away as painfully as her severed tongue. Indeed, in lingering on the final image of the severed tongue, a reader might be reminded not of Daphne, but of Philomela, who instead of transforming into a tree to escape her rapist, had her tongue cut out to thwart her ability to tell anyone about the rape. Because "Diana's Electric Tongue" is aesthetically and affectively closer to the pastel pinks and softness of cuteness than the tragedy of Ovidian myth, Diana doesn't follow Philomela into full nightingale transformation. Instead, this comic's open-ended repudiation of narrative closure allows electric-tongued Diana, through intoxication, sex, or

relationality, to follow the circuit of unbecoming—sometimes shattering, sometimes funny and tender—over and over again.

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