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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**THE SPECULATIVE AGENCY OF THE NONHUMAN:  
ANIMAL, OBJECT, AND POSTHUMAN WORLDINGS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

**Sophia Booth Magnone**

June 2016

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Dean Tyrus Miller  
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## **Abstract**

The Speculative Agency of the Nonhuman:  
Animal, Object, and Posthuman Worldings

by

Sophia Booth Magnone

This dissertation explores representations of nonhuman agency across the diverse literary tradition of speculative fiction. I identify speculative fiction as a site where cultural discourses of personhood, species, and power might be challenged and reworked; a loosely defined genre, SF insists on an openness to disruption, exploiting the creative and politically radical possibilities of imagining the world otherwise. The project draws upon an archive of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French, English, and U.S. American texts that adopt a speculative mode in order to literalize long-standing associations of the feminine, animal, and object in the Western patriarchal imagination, populating their pages with figures of feminized cyborgs, animalized women, and mechanized animals. By worlding a range of beings defined by their difference from the human norm, the texts intervene in longstanding anthropocentric discourses of “who” versus “what,” proposing a more inclusive notion of personhood that recognizes collective, interdependent, and passive forms of agency. I draw upon feminist theory, gender and queer theory, animal studies, and posthumanist scholarship to articulate an intersectional approach to multispecies ethics.

The four chapters separate into two parts, each concerned with one vector of the infinitely multiple field of the nonhuman. The first two focus on artificial, machinic life as one

alternative to human species-being; Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* in Chapter 1 and Villiers's *L'Ève future* and Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* in Chapter 2 employ cyborg figures to challenge dominant discourses of gender propriety and authorial agency. The second two chapters focus on animals and animality as a second alternative to humanity; Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Darrieussecq's *Truismes* in Chapter 3 and Stapledon's *Sirius* and Bakis's *Lives of the Monster Dogs* in Chapter 4 attend to the perils and pleasures of bestial life on the margins of human-dominated society. Together, the chapters build toward a notion of worlding as collaboration—between humans, animals, and machines; between genders; between storytellers and stories, authors and texts.

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This dissertation is dedicated with love to the memory of Victoria Rogers Booth.

# Introduction

## Anthropocentrism and its discontents

In a short article entitled “Ms. Found in an Ant Hill,” a pair of literary scholars undertake a close reading of a found text. Their work is hindered by material difficulties: “the messages are fragmentary,” they note, “and the translation approximate and highly interpretive” (200). But convinced of the text’s significance for their field, they proceed with caution, examining each fragment in turn. They consider multiple translations: does the author mean to say, in the opening lines, “[I will] not touch feelers. [I will] not stroke,” indicating an autobiography, or “[Do] not touch feelers. [Do] not stroke,” indicating a manifesto (200-201)? They draw on thorough background research about the language of this text to identify the author’s linguistic experimentation, noting that “the mark translated ‘Praise!’ is half of the customary salutation ‘Praise the Queen!’... but the word/mark signifying ‘Queen’ has been omitted” (201). The most crucial part of the text, the scholars argue, is its final exhortation: “Eat the eggs! Up with the Queen!” (202). The meaning of these lines has provoked considerable controversy among interpreters; the scholars, making an important intervention in their field, suggest that previous readers have been led astray by “an ethnocentric interpretation of the word ‘up’” (202). In this

writing's cultural context, "up" is not a "good" direction—it indicates "the scorching sun; the freezing night; no shelter in the beloved tunnels; exile; death" (202). For this "strange author, in the solitude of her lonely tunnel," "Up with the Queen!" signifies "the ultimate blasphemy conceivable" (202-203). The fragmented manuscript thus bears witness to a failed revolution; the decapitated body of its presumed author, found nearby, attests to the high stakes of this desperate communiqué.

The text in question: an arrangement of acacia seeds, each marked with touch-gland exudations. The author: a long-deceased worker ant. The scholars: specialists in the study of therolinguistics, a fictional discipline invented by Ursula Le Guin in her short story "The Author of the Acacia Seeds' and Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*" (1974). In this brief story, via the indirect and relatively dry form of an academic journal, Le Guin plunges her reader into an extraordinarily different world. This is a world in which ants write texts, manipulating the media and concepts available to them to represent their experience. It is a world in which human scholars take these texts seriously, cautiously using what they know about ant-being to help them uncover the emotional and cultural significance of ant expression. For these scholars, the worker ant and her revolutionary writings matter. Their reading acknowledges her as both an author and a person—not an ant-shaped human, but a creature with her own complex and meaningful thoughts, feelings, and desires that resonate, however partially, with readers in a very different context. The traces she has left of her world and her struggle may be hard, even impossible, for a human to comprehend. Yet the attempt, the therolinguists maintain, is worth that risk.

The contributors to the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics* have dedicated

their lives to the close reading of nonhuman forms of representation. Like anthropologists who study the languages and traditions of others, or archaeologists who uncover and interpret fragments of civilizations long vanished, the therolinguists read into cultures far removed from their own. They work across a divide that is perhaps deeper and more historically entrenched than any that exists between human cultures: the separation between human and nonhuman beings. In Le Guin's imagined discipline, this divide is not minimized. The journal extracts grapple with the many difficulties of reading nonhuman texts. These writings emerge in forms that are practically undetectable to human senses. Some, like the "kinetic sea-writings of Penguin" (205), must be captured on underwater camera and slowed down in order to yield recognizable patterns, while others, like the ant's chemically-imprinted seeds, involve non-visual components that may have no match in the human sensorium. The texts' content poses a second layer of impenetrability: their conceptual frameworks may not translate easily into human patterns of thinking, or may appear inverted, like the ant author's up/down binary. What Le Guin envisions is far from the multispecies utopia of, say, a Disney film, where everyone, regardless of species, speaks human (and English). Yet the very existence of therolinguistics suggests that what lies between humans and other species is not an unbridgeable abyss. Its founding premise is that humans do not have a monopoly on language, thought, emotion, or expression—that these are properties of life itself, in all its diverse forms. There are extreme differences between these many forms, but also profound continuities. With an open mind and a practice of meticulous care, Le Guin suggests, one might begin to grasp—always tentatively, always partially—the rich, complex, and fascinating emotional and cultural worlds of other kinds of beings.

In the context of the twenty-first century industrialized West, therolinguistics likely

registers as a whimsical impossibility (for a sympathetic reader) or a ridiculous fantasy (for a hostile one). The story could indeed be read as an ironic parody of the work of the humanities, wherein a group of overeager scholars generates grandiose theses over a pile of seeds. Such readings place themselves at a distance from Le Guin’s speculative future, asserting the perspective of the so-called “real world.” In this real world, animals neither speak nor write; they do not make art or tell stories. Those capacities rest on a set of minimum qualifications—intelligence, thought, language, self-conscious subjectivity—that are synonymous with human being. In short, these readings impose, onto the unruly openness of Le Guin’s work, the tidy order of anthropocentrism: a system of belief and practice that places human beings at the privileged center of all things, and that tends to structure human affairs across philosophy, law, religion, culture, kinship, and more.

Perhaps, one might argue, it is wholly appropriate for humans to inhabit an anthropocentric perspective, both as readers and as subjects. After all, the world owes much of its texture to the contributions of the human race—over ten thousand years of technology, art, culture, and knowledge unmatched by any other species.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these contributions range from sublime to devastating: according to the geological calendar in widespread scientific and popular use, we live in the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by the global impact of humankind.<sup>2</sup> Discussions of the Anthropocene often revolve around humans’ ties to and responsibility toward their fellow earth-dwellers. But from the term’s etymological emphasis on the *Anthropos*, one

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<sup>1</sup> As does, of course, this dissertation, a document written by a human, about literature written by humans, produced for other humans to read so that its author might go on to succeed in the human world. To oppose anthropocentrism is not (necessarily) to be antihuman or to spurn human achievements. “After all,” as Dominic Pettman wryly notes, “some of my best friends are humans. I am often one myself—among other things” (*Human* 196).

<sup>2</sup> In recent years, a vast amount of scholarship from across the disciplinary spectrum has been devoted to the concept and implications of the Anthropocene. For just one of many possible entries into the topic, see Oldfield et al. and subsequent issues of the journal *The Anthropocene Review*.

might easily conclude that anthropocentrism is simply the way of the world, for better or for worse—that although humans ought to manage their extensive impact more thoughtfully, their status as exceptionally important and influential beings is beyond dispute.<sup>3</sup> Or, taking a more biologically relative point of view, one might assert that anthropocentrism is the natural state for humankind, just as felinocentrism is the natural state for cats, ornithocentrism for birds, and myrmecocentrism for ants—that the drive toward species self-preservation requires an innately self-centered outlook.

Yet to take anthropocentrism as a natural and inevitable state of affairs is to obscure the long history of a philosophical discourse with profound ethical and political consequences. What Donna Haraway characterizes as “the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism” asserts that “to be human is to be on the opposite side of the Great Divide from all the others” (*When Species Meet* 11)—a divide that legitimates suspicion and contempt as well as violence and exploitation directed at the nonhuman Other. Anthropocentrism justifies humanity’s use and abuse of every other kind of being; it establishes as common sense the notion that “our” needs and interests naturally and inevitably trump “theirs.” This logic of exploitation, Jacques Derrida argues, “traverses the whole history of humanity” (*Animal* 14) and swells with mounting force throughout modernity: the last two centuries of industrial and technological development

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<sup>3</sup> This critique is lodged by some scholars who object to the name given to our current era but agree with its underlying periodization; Jason W. Moore and others, for instance, propose “Capitalocene” to specify the social and economic contexts of anthropogenic impact. But many invocations of “Anthropocene” are aimed at challenging anthropocentrism, not reinforcing it, by emphasizing the contingency and complexity of humanity’s global power. Recognizing human beings as geological agents, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, means collapsing the long-held distinction between human history and natural history, a fundamental assumption in Western political thought (207); the environment can no longer be reduced to a backdrop for human affairs. Bruno Latour writes that in the Anthropocene, “we all agree that, far from being a Galilean body stripped of any other movements than those of billiard balls, the Earth has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged *actor*” (3). The concept of the Anthropocene is founded upon the recognition of diverse forms of agency that are widely distributed across the modernist divide between (nonhuman) nature and (human) culture.

amount to “the *unprecedented* proportions of this subjection of the animal” (25). The subjection of animals is only one aspect of the modern global catastrophe for nonhuman life. Billions of animals live and die each year in the miserable squalor of factory farms; many thousands of animal, plant, and invertebrate species are critically endangered; carbon dioxide accumulates in the atmosphere at levels not seen for hundreds of thousands of years; deforestation, rising sea levels, global warming, ocean acidification, and other anthropogenic changes continue to permanently reshape the face of the earth. In the long term, anthropocentrism emerges as a pattern of pernicious and suicidal destruction.

At no point in the history of anthropocentrism has its dominance over human thoughts and affairs been total. Hesitation, critique, and resistance have emerged within Western political and philosophical history; alternative world views that situate humans within multispecies networks can be found in the pasts and presents of many currently non-hegemonic cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup> In the last few decades in particular, challenges to anthropocentrism have been launched from many fronts, engendering a range of discourses that articulate alternative perspectives on human and nonhuman being. These discourses collectively signal a critical shift away from humanist doctrine and toward what is called, variously, posthumanism, critical animal studies, companion species, multispecies ethnography, anthropo-zoo-genesis, ecocriticism, vital materialism, actor network theory, and more. The anti-anthropocentric turn, broadly speaking, pays attention to the overlooked ontological, ethical, political, and affective structures in which

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<sup>4</sup> Kim Tallbear, for instance, suggests that crossing indigenous studies with animal studies provides necessary cultural and political contexts to interspecies relations, and helps extend the notion of personhood beyond humans, animals, and even the living. Eduardo Kohn explores “a world of living thoughts beyond the human” (72) via the more-than-human ontologies of the Runa people. Neel Ahuja opens postcolonial critique to multispecies forms of theory and resistance, intervening in an animal studies tradition that obscures racial and imperial histories.

humans and nonhumans are enmeshed; it pursues theories and practices of justice, care, and symbiosis between humans and their animal, vegetable, environmental, technological, and object others. Like Le Guin's fiction, this critical turn re-vivifies a humanist world stripped bare of all forms of agency save one; it substitutes for anthropocentrism the premise that, as Dominic Pettman argues, "we humans are not the star of the story. The *story* is the star of the story" (*Love* 204). Humans resume their place among a host of nonhuman cohabitants, collaborators, and competitors, all at work to produce a diverse and shared world.

Le Guin's speculative foray into the agency of nonhumans, situated in a posthumanist critical trajectory, offers a starting point, both methodological and ethical, for this dissertation. With a spirit of openness and a willingness to be surprised, humans, she imagines, can be re-trained to perceive the world differently: instead of an inert stage awaiting the drama of human affairs, upon which nonhumans serve only as props and tools, the therolinguists see a world teeming with fellow agents, each with their own stories to tell. To recognize these agents, to attempt to grasp their stories, is partly an aesthetic pursuit: the study of therolinguistics helps detect the infinite beauty and meaning inscribed in the operations of life in all its forms. As Pettman suggests, "How much more fascinating, more vital, more seductive to inhabit a world of events and encounter that are not structured and limited by fixed taxonomy, by defensive or aggressive sovereignty, by the intense need to invent one's own spotlight and then stay within its beam" (*Human* 196). Even more importantly, therolinguistics imagines an ethical imperative to intervene in the anthropocentric status quo. Human exceptionalism asserts that humans matter above all else—that, indeed, other things matter only insofar as they serve some purpose for humankind. Therolinguistics insists to the contrary that everything matters, and furthermore,



that humans are obligated, both as scholars and as cohabitants of a shared planet, to attend to the mattering of beings very different from themselves.

In the spirit of Le Guin's story, this project traces the emergence of nonhuman agency across the diverse literary tradition of speculative fiction. I focus on an archive of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French, English, and U.S. American texts that use the speculative mode to literalize long-standing associations of the feminine, the animal, and the object in the Western patriarchal imagination, populating their pages with figures of feminized cyborgs, animalized women, and mechanized animals. With these texts, I argue for the need to recognize nonhuman stories and voices, to let these minority forms of signification draft new narratives of being, acting, and mattering in a more-than-human world. In the sections that follow, I introduce the conceptual pieces of this project: speculative fiction, the "nonhuman," nonhuman agency, and worlding.

## **Why speculative fiction?**

This project assembles an array of texts, drawn from disparate historical, cultural, and literary contexts, into a pack. This pack is not homogenous; it contains difference and discord as well as correspondence and harmony, all productive forms of encounter. There is a genealogy that binds the members of this pack—not filial heritage, but queer kinship.<sup>5</sup> This pack forms around a particular set of problematics: its common concern is the establishment and erosion of

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<sup>5</sup> Queer kinship signals forms of community and attachment that exceed or contradict the genetic, legal, and institutional bonds that are socially legitimated as "family" in dominant heteronormative discourse. For some, it means not simply the inclusion of queer people in existing kinship structures (as in gay marriage), but also a revision of those structures and their value altogether. "Even as lesbian and gay activism demands that we continue to fight for access to fully institutionalized systems of social reproduction... [queer theory needs] to continually identify practices of renewal that exceed the state's major form of 'recognition'" (Freeman 298-299).

boundaries between human subjects and nonhuman objects. The texts that form this pack are also joined by their common tendency to breach the boundaries of realism, to invent category-defying hybrids of humanity, animality, and objecthood. That is, they all practice a speculative approach to the world, interested in representing not only the way the world is but the way it might be.

This imaginative outlook links texts across time, situating nineteenth-century French Decadent literature and twentieth-century science fiction into a long and diverse tradition that I call “speculative fiction” (abbreviated SF).<sup>6</sup> The term “speculative fiction” resonates in both popular and critical contexts, though its meaning is anything but precise. What R.B. Gill calls “a widely read but ill-defined grouping of works” (71) includes a number of familiar literary genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, fairy tale, horror, and magical realism; “clearly,” Gill notes, “speculative fiction is marked by diversity; there is no limit to possible micro-subjects and, understandably in such a mixed field, no standard definition” (72). Gill identifies something productively confounding about speculative fiction’s fuzzy boundaries, which push against the limitations of traditional, canonical genre classifications and gesture, as Margaret Atwood suggests, toward the impurity of genre altogether:

Speculative fiction may be used as the tree, for which science fiction, science fiction fantasy, and fantasy are the branches. The beast has at least nine heads, and the ability to eat all other fictional forms in sight, and to turn them into its own substance. (In this way it's like every other form of literature: genres may look hard and fast from a distance, but up close it's nailing jelly to a wall.) (Atwood 513)

SF is a tree, or a beast, or an apparatus of nails, wall, and jelly; like the characters that populate its worlds, it is lively and unpredictable, rather than static and lifeless. Atwood’s colorful description

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<sup>6</sup> In line with the categorical fuzziness of speculative fiction, SF (also written sf) is a purposely imprecise abbreviation. Most obviously, it refers both to science fiction and speculative fiction. Haraway employs it more expansively to evoke “speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, speculative fiction, science fact, science fantasy” as well as “string figures” and “so far,” a network of looping threads and patterns that come together as “a model for worlding” (“SF” 12).

of the beast omnivorously consuming all literary forms helps articulate a key aspect of the speculative: it is not a hard-and-fast category but a mode in which any kind of text willing to stray from real-world constraints can partake.

Speculative fiction thus names a process available to all kinds of texts. As Joshua LaBare argues, it also names an approach that a reader or critic might take to a text. LaBare defines SF as “a mode available to all forms of practice, production, and interpretation” (4); more than a reading practice, SF is distinguished as a “way of experiencing” primarily guided by the state of affective openness known as a “sense of wonder” (5).<sup>7</sup> Thus in my readings of these texts, which I group together for their speculative qualities, I submerge myself in the SF mode, letting myself be led by the experimental, wondrous, and sometimes shocking directions they take. I take their speculations seriously, particularly their imagined alternatives to structures of domination—patriarchy, anthropocentrism, objectification, and more—that seem all but inevitable in the present reality. Reading and writing in the SF mode means, for instance, actively refusing the commonsensical axiom that only humans can speak, think, and tell stories. Representing worlds open to disruption and surprise, SF facilitates the recognition of nonhuman agency in unexpected, even illegible forms.

LaBare also emphasizes the critical utility of employing SF as a mode, rather than a clearly-defined genre. The SF mode serves him as a practice of inclusion, allowing his readings to embrace genres, works, and authors that would be obscured in a study of the more narrowly defined “science fiction” (LaBare 10-12). For while science fiction has its own fuzzy

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<sup>7</sup> “Sense of wonder,” as LaBare notes, is a term with a long history in SF criticism. Farah Mendlesohn calls it “the emotional heart of sf” (3), noting that while the early days of SF (in the mid 1920s) depended on technological novelty to evoke a sense of wonder in readers, the genre developed other literary and affective structures to explore wonder beyond that presentist perspective.

historical and theoretical boundaries, it takes recognizable shape as a tradition through U.S. American pulp magazines of the 1920s-50s such as Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* and John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction*. Gernsback, who gave the genre its name, also set thematic parameters that continue to shape it today: science fiction's core attribute is its creative engagement with questions of science, technology, and/or the future.<sup>8</sup> A critical move from science to speculative fiction helps trace an underlying continuity between recognizably science-fictional works—stories of aliens and robots, space travel and weird science—and works that enact their imaginative interventions through other kinds of stories, scenarios, and beings. That is, speculative fiction, broadly defined, need not be tied to science fiction's roots in modernity, technoscience, and the cultural context of the industrialized West.

Those roots, of course, do not determine the horizon of possibility; plenty of science fiction casts doubt upon or subverts dominant ideologies of science, technology, and progress. But many readers and scholars point to a set of hegemonic tendencies that transcend any single writer to haunt the structure of the genre itself. Le Guin, reflecting in 1975 on the American science fiction tradition as a whole, identifies an attachment to hierarchy, militarism, and capitalist exploitation; she yearns for the genre to shed its “authoritarian, power-worshipping, and intensely parochial” elitism (“American SF” 1). John Rieder maps the complex relationship between science fiction and colonialism, noting common tropes (the ideology of progress, the alien Other, the fantasy of discovery, and more) that fuel the imaginary of both traditions. Veronica Hollinger notes that “on the whole, science fiction is an overwhelmingly *straight* discourse” (24), while Charles R. Saunders notes that much mainstream SF fails to offer themes, characters, and

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Attebery explains in detail how the genre coalesced and flourished in the “magazine era” of 1926-1960.

experiences that resonate with readers of color (398).<sup>9</sup> Speculative fiction and the SF mode are not inherently immune from these critiques.<sup>10</sup> Yet as they open toward a wider range of texts and concerns, they constitute a kind of “science fiction plus” that welcomes difference, attends to multiple perspectives, and recognizes the past, present, and future contributions of a diverse group of writers and readers.<sup>11</sup>

My archive, though necessarily limited in scope, aims toward this practice of inclusivity.<sup>12</sup> Only one of my selected texts (Stapledon’s *Sirius*) seems at home in the science fiction canon; the others might be judged too old, too “literary,” too feminine, or not scientific or technical enough to fit that genre distinction. Yet bound by the loose connecting threads of speculative fiction, works of French decadent literature (Rachilde and Villiers), mid-century science fiction (Stapledon), and postmodern fairy tale and fantasy (Carter, Darrieussecq, and Bakis) have much to say to one another, many common questions to tease apart across time, space,

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<sup>9</sup> Science fiction has become much more visibly diverse in the past few decades with the mainstream success and/or literary canonization of many female, queer, and person of color writers, including Le Guin, Atwood, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany. But this growing diversity comes with a backlash: some writers and fans argue that the foregrounding of race, gender, sexuality, or other forms of difference constitutes a distraction from the core values of SF. In 2015, these tensions came to a head surrounding the Hugo Awards, one of the most prestigious honors of the genre. A group of activists angered by what they perceived as the hijacking of science fiction by ideologically-driven “Social Justice Warriors” organized to flood the award nominations with works by white men, sparking an extensive and ongoing rift among SF writers, critics, and fans. See Amy Wallace for an extensive overview of this clash.

<sup>10</sup> I note, for instance, that “speculate” derives from a chain of Latin nouns and verbs: *speculat-* “observed from a vantage point,” comes from the verb *speculārī* “to spy out, watch, examine, observe,” itself from *specula* “a look-out, watch-tower” and ultimately *specĕre* “to see, look” (OED). This etymology of surveillance and non-consensual looking troubles the visionary promise of SF. The speculation that I embrace is not a colonizing, intrusive gaze, but a receptive attentiveness to what is out there to be seen.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Sheree Thomas’s edited collection *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. The framework of speculative fiction allows Thomas both to highlight the often-observed contributions of black writers to the science fiction genre, and to trace a wider genealogy of black speculation that exceeds strict genre boundaries.

<sup>12</sup> I am conscious, however, of the overwhelming whiteness of this project, as well as its Euro-American focus. I assemble these texts because of the ways they invite me to consider questions of species, gender, and power. The marginal presence of race as a critical category says something, I think, about the genre as a whole, as well as my own critical path through it (guided, throughout this dissertation, by the majority-white tradition of feminist SF, and especially by Angela Carter, a writer heavily focused upon her white European literary forebears). There is much science and speculative fiction that turns a critical eye to race and racism, and relates these social categories to species and personhood—topics of great interest to me in my future work.

language, and culture. The two Decadent writers, coming chronologically first in this archive, initiate an inquiry into the possibilities of artificial being; from their respective locations in the twentieth century, Carter, Stapledon, and Bakis respond, influenced by the threat and promise of modern technoscience. The chafing constraints of the gender binary materialize across the archive, particularly for Rachilde, Carter, and Darrieussecq, who each dream up more flexible versions of gender beyond conventional masculinity and femininity. And every text makes its own foray into the question of nonhuman authorship, from the hysteric mediums of Rachilde and Villiers to the struggling pawed and hooved narrators imagined by Stapledon, Darrieussecq, and Bakis. These are just a few of the howls that echo thematically, philosophically, and formally across this textual pack.

The texts in this dissertation are all engaged in projects of speculation, charting possible (and impossible) alternatives to the norms that govern their particular contexts. Confronted with the set of common-sense truths that constitute “reality,” these stories hesitate in order to dwell on the simple, revolutionary question: “what if things were different?” In response to the “reality” of the binary gender system, they invent new ways to inhabit, combine, and reject masculinity and femininity, pushing against expectations of what it means to be a gendered being. In response to the “reality” of the dividing line between humans and other species, they insist on the value of all forms of being and the intimate interdependence between humans and their animal “others.” In response to the self-evident “reality” of personhood, they focus on the instability of the category, the ways that subjectivity is permeated by objectivity as both a threat and a value.

At the same time, these texts place limits on the power of speculation. In their creation of novums—the elements that mark them as speculative, not realist, fiction—none goes so far as

to invent a new world; instead, they invent unexpected kinds of beings and relationships that clash in various ways with the existing world.<sup>13</sup> These are tales of anomalies and exceptions. They may intervene into oppressive norms of gender, species, and personhood, but those norms are never written out of the story; patriarchy, anthropocentrism, racism, transmisogyny, and other forms of domination weigh just as heavily upon the pages of this archive as they do in the world that forms the present context of my reading. One result is that violence, pain, and loss suffuse this project; the rare happy endings among these texts are always partial and ambivalent. Nevertheless, the project is fundamentally oriented toward hope: the hope of using literature, among many other tools, to build something better than the accumulated inheritance of so-called “reality.” There is no ideal end point; there will always be work to do. By dwelling on the problems they identify—by “staying with the trouble” (as Haraway puts it, “Anthropocene” n.p.)—these texts participate in that work, refusing to skip over the difficult intermediate stages to get to a desired better world.

The stories I gather here are not intellectually or politically perfect. They do not provide ready-made blueprints for action; they may not, indeed, know how to solve the problems encountered by their multiply marginalized characters. What they collectively offer is a relentless insistence on possibility—the possibility that the world can be otherwise, or indeed, that if we can just learn how to pay attention, we might discover that it already is. The social and political imperative to “be realistic” can function as shorthand for a fatalistic reinforcement of the status quo: “This is the way things are; this is the way things have been; there is no other feasible way.”

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<sup>13</sup> Early SF critic Darko Suvin proposes the *novum*, “a strange newness” (373), as a defining characteristic of the genre. The capacity to invent *novums* (the conventional plural) embeds SF in “the liberating tradition which contends that the world is not necessarily the way our present empirical valley happens to be”—that is, that an imperfect world can and will change (373).

In contrast, the generic open of speculative fiction grants the power to resist that foreclosure of possibility. Simply imagining things differently will not immediately change the world; other kinds of work will need to follow. As Walidah Imarisha argues, critical speculation invokes a grave responsibility: “are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of ‘the real’ and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?” (5). Telling different stories about the past, present, and future is the first step in a long and complex process of re-worlding.

### **Defining nonhumanity: the “who” and the “what”**

This project orients itself around a purposely open-ended category of analysis: the “nonhuman.” The strategic utility of this negatively-defined term is twofold. First, its non-specificity allows many types of beings to congregate in its fold; if “human” tends to be an exclusive category, “nonhuman” is the opposite. A broad focus on the nonhuman allows this project to string together human cyborgs and living statues (Chapters 1 and 2) with human-animal hybrids (Chapter 3) and mechanized animals (Chapter 4). Each chapter deals with beings who are other-than-normal and other-than-human in multiple ways, embodying various combinations of animality and objectivity; grouping them all as “nonhuman” lets me map the intersections between forms of difference rather than restrict my focus to just one. Second, its “non-” signals an oppositional intervention into the usual ways of regarding the world, shifting attention from humanity toward the often marginalized experiences of other types of beings.

At the same time, the term “nonhuman” must be employed with caution. It risks, first of all, reifying a binary divide between humankind and everything else in the world, a divide that



tends to serve as the foundation for anthropocentrism in all its forms. The grammatical simplicity of “human” and “nonhuman” suggests that beings can be neatly separated into one of the two categories. Yet ongoing scholarship across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences suggests that this binary is no more than a convenient fiction and points instead to profound corporeal, cultural, and affective entanglements among forms of life. The field of biology, for instance, has come to recognize that the billions of microbial cells inhabiting every human body are not merely foreign “germs,” but rather crucial factors in the formation of an individual.<sup>14</sup> Every “I” is a multispecies “we”; as biologists Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan note, “we people are really walking assemblages, beings who have integrated various other kinds of organisms... each of us is a sort of loose committee” (19). A movement within the field of anthropology known as “multispecies ethnography” responds by shifting its own unit of analysis from the self-evident Anthropos to its many complex relationships, focusing on sites of interaction and encounter between humans and other kinds of beings.<sup>15</sup> “Human nature,” as Anna Tsing claims, “is an interspecies relationship” (144); studying humanity accurately and attentively thus means situating humans within historically and culturally specific networks of interdependence with animal, plant, microbial, and object others. Humans are what Haraway calls “companion species” to and with many other kinds of beings, both human and nonhuman. Companion species are deeply entangled and mutually constitutive: “the partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with” (*When Species Meet* 17). For those interested in moving beyond the traditional hierarchy of humans over the rest, it would seem imperative to assert, as Matthew

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<sup>14</sup> See Magnone “Microbial Zoopoetics in Octavia Butler’s *Clay’s Ark*” for a fuller discussion of the human microbiome and its SF implications.

<sup>15</sup> See Kirksey, Schuetze, and Heimreich for an introduction to the methods and aims of the emerging field of multispecies ethnography.

Calarco does, that “the human-animal distinction”—and more broadly, the human-nonhuman distinction— “can no longer and ought no longer to be maintained” (3).

“Nonhuman” carries a second serious risk: as a single word, it cannot possibly do justice to the many kinds of worldly actors it attempts to name. “Nonhuman” describes an infinitely diverse range of beings with very little in common, save the discursive tendency to exclude them from the category of humankind. Derrida warns against the uncritical simplicity of the word “animal,” which reduces a plurality of living creatures into the straightforward Other of humankind. The notion of “animality in general” cannot be abstracted from this lively multiplicity, “except by means of violence and willful ignorance... The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a crime against rigorous thinking... it is also a crime of the first order against the animals” (*Animal* 48). “Nonhuman” risks escalating that crime by trying to fit not only animals but also plants, microorganisms, cyborgs, objects, and other less-classifiable kinds of beings into a single conceptual category. Furthermore, while “nonhuman” intends to shift the focus away from the human majority, grammatically it reinscribes the human at the center of discourse, defining all beings in terms of whether they are or are not a member of that privileged class.

To escape the conceptual crime he identifies in the overgeneralizing word “animal,” Derrida asks his audience to substitute the neologism “*animot*,” a purposely estranging term that incorporates plurality (via its French homonym, the plural form *animaux*) as well as discursivity (via its ending *-mot*, “word”) (*Animal* 47). *Animot* reminds humans that “animal” is a *mot*, a word, exchanged between humans to perform certain (and often non-innocent) functions, and that the beings whom it purports to represent are heterogeneous and many. I have no such linguistic

transformation of “nonhuman” to offer, but I employ the word in the deconstructive, self-critiquing mode of Derrida’s *animot*. For this project, the nonhuman signifies as a discursive category, encompassing the sum total of what is systematically excluded from the privileged class of the human. This exclusion is always political, never neutral; it emerges from what Giorgio Agamben terms the “anthropological machine,” a complex institutional apparatus devoted to obscuring the fuzzy boundaries of humanity in order to produce it as a seemingly coherent whole. “Homo sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human” (Agamben 26). For the anthropological machine, the nonhuman functions as a constitutive outside, defined not by some intrinsic difference, but by its demarcation of where the human, the dominant category, begins and ends.

This designation of humanity is not neutral in any sense—zoological, social, legal, spiritual, or aesthetic. Humanity does not merely mark one type of being among many; it cannot be invoked without imposing a hierarchy of power and value. In the Western patriarchal capitalist tradition that, in a broad sense, has come to dominate worldly affairs, the human stands over and against the animal, the thing, the object, the inhuman. Across a range of discourses, the category of the human is made coextensive with the category of the person—that is, the category of beings whose lives and interests matter and merit attention. Human and nonhuman are mapped, as Derrida puts it, onto the simple hierarchy of “the who and the what” (*Beast* 187), two pronouns on opposite sides of a conceptual abyss.<sup>16</sup> “Who” indicates a person, a sovereign subject, one

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida pursues the motif of “the who and the what” in relation to multiple traditional nonhuman others, including the animal and the marionette (*The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*). Bernard Stiegler employs the same grammatical framework to interrogate the “who” and the “what” of humankind’s longstanding entanglement with technology. Contra the conventional understanding of human invention, which views the human as “who” (the active inventor) and the technical as always “what” (the passive invented), Stiegler argues that there is a historical co-constitution between humanity and technology. The human becomes human at the same time and in the same motion that it takes up technology—the human is invented as it invents (Stiegler Chapter 3).

who speaks and acts. “What” indicates a thing, an object, something to which things are done. The distinction is both ontological and ethical, descriptive and prescriptive; “what”ness is, above all, a status, marking that which exists to serve, is exploitable and disposable. The attribution of “what”ness is crucial to the long humanist tradition that Haraway calls “making killable.” Distinct from killing itself (for, as Haraway argues, no one lives outside killing, not even herbivores of any species), “making killable” is the categorical denial of responsibility toward a kind; it aims to make “a whole world of those who can be killed, because finally they are only something, not somebody” (*When Species Meet* 79).

The who and the what, the human and the nonhuman, are determinations made by those with power at the expense of those without it. To interrogate this distinction is to confront injustice against a range of minority beings—against animals, but also against people of color, colonized people, queer and transgender people, people with disabilities, and more. Human history reveals over and over that personhood is socially and contextually contingent. Not all humans enjoy its privileges; systems of exclusion based on race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, ability and more are always at work to keep certain humans out of the hegemonically-defined “who.” In the antebellum United States, to cite just one example, the Three-Fifths Compromise ensured that an enslaved black body would count as only a fraction of a person under the law; over two centuries later, in a year marked by increasingly visible and deadly violence inflicted upon black people by law enforcement, Ta-Nehisi Coates warns his son that “the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body” (9); as he notes, the question of “what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term *people* to actually mean” (6) remains an ongoing problem with the highest possible stakes.

To focus on a series of fictional nonhumans, and to make species a primary category of analysis, as this project does, might therefore seem like an abdication of responsibility toward the countless real-world human beings still struggling for legal, social, and ethical recognition. I view this critique not as an attack to be repelled or disproved, but as a crucial provocation to the work of both critical animal studies and literary scholarship. The former must remember that injustice is never a single-issue problem, that species intersects with race, gender, colonialism, sexuality, and other categories historically and currently used to sort “who” from “what.”<sup>17</sup> The latter must remember to orient its critical and theoretical insights toward the world at large, not only the intellectual guild of the academy. At the same time, this project asserts both the necessity of paying attention to animals and other nonhuman beings, and the immense promise of literature as a site to work through urgent contemporary problems. My readings aim to identify and break down various cultural mechanisms of exclusion, based primarily, though not exclusively, on a human-nonhuman divide. These texts help us imagine what it would take to construct more inclusive, hospitable worlds for all manner of fellow beings—a first, tentative step toward something better, but a vital one.

## **Nonhuman agency**

The diverse nonhuman beings featured in the following chapters are united not by any essential similarity, but by the ways they are made to function as humanity’s Other, to be the non- that allows for the coherence of the human. In their particular cultural contexts, each is

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<sup>17</sup> As Cary Wolfe notes, “as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well” (*Animal Rites* 8).

subject to the exclusionary mechanisms of the anthropological machine. Forms of difference, including animality, artificiality, hybridity, and gender nonconformity, render them unassimilable to norms of human species-being, which are themselves inextricable from norms of proper gender, race, and class belonging. They are made to function as “what” in opposition to a hegemonic “who,” with often violent and traumatic effects. This project challenges these mechanisms of exclusion with two interlinked strategies. The first, and perhaps more apparent, is to affirm the “personhood” of these unconventional and ostracized nonhumans, to show that their difference from the norm does not disqualify them as beings who matter. My readings of these texts explore how capacities and values that are often claimed to define human being—thought, reason, emotion, love, invention, authorship, and more—might actually exceed (or precede) species boundaries to materialize throughout the more-than-human world. This strategy of putting the “who” back into the “what” has a corollary, equally important, in the strategy to put the “what” back into the “who.” The goal of this dissertation is not simply to assert the agency of a range of fictional nonhuman figures, but to draw upon those figures and their strange forms of difference to unsettle and revise what is meant by agency altogether. The binary oppositions of who and what, person and thing, subject and object cannot hold; as Derrida says, “the living being is divisible and constituted by a multiplicity of agencies, forces and intensities that are sometimes in tension or even in contradiction” (*Beast* 181). The human “who” fails to live up to its sovereign ideal; the inhuman “what” reveals its rich potential for lively worlding.

Each chapter, therefore, features complicated beings who are significantly other-than-human, whose modes of being in the world diverge profoundly from the humanist ideal of rational autonomous subjectivity. Though at times they strive to achieve that ideal, they also specifically

embody what tends to be disavowed from it: passivity, objectivity, submission, irrationality. They struggle to define themselves, to author their own stories; they also find value in giving themselves up to be defined by others, to submit themselves as texts and let stories be written around and upon them. These ambivalent tendencies manifest differently across the archive. Raoule and Jacques, in Chapter 1, are entangled in the complex relationship of author and text as power and submission flow back and forth between them. The feminine self-authorship of Chapter 2's four Eve figures cannot be extricated from the discourses and forces imposed upon them from without. In Chapter 3, two woman-animal hybrids resist objectification for their own survival, yet love compels them to strategically submit themselves as objects to be consumed. And though the cyborg dogs of Chapter 4 fight for independence from the human race, they find themselves drawn to domestication as a model of intersubjective responsibility.

All of these nonhumans thus introduce ambivalence into the ongoing question of what it means to be a person with agency in a more-than-human world. Each is defined, within the dominant discourses that structure their cultural context, by their failure to achieve the humanist ideal of personhood. They “fail” for a number of intertwined reasons: for excessive or improper femininity, for unsettling artificiality, for unheard-of submissiveness, for feral animality. Yet their stories refuse the judgment of failure. These speculative counter-discourses enliven what is supposed to be unlively; they explore the worlds of what is supposed to be worldless. In so doing, they do not merely push themselves closer to the coveted, fixed, bounded category of the human “who”; rather, they challenge the binary of “who” and “what” as a rubric for distributing respect, ethical recognition and care.

This project traces what I call the “speculative agency of the nonhuman”—speculative

because the diverse forms of agency in play within these pages require some imaginative work to be identified and understood. Often, the agency of these nonhumans stretches the limits of the term itself: rather than autonomy, intention, self-determination, or choice—that is, the defining qualities attributed to the humanist rational subject across the Cartesian tradition—agency emerges in these texts from non-power, dependence, objectivity, and submission. There is risk in dwelling in that realm of non-power, as the nonhuman characters who animate these pages will attest. Vulnerable beings all, they open themselves to violent appropriation by the powerful humanist, patriarchal agents that continue to rule their worlds. Yet the texts insistently affirm the value of that vulnerable space. Together they build a notion of agency that is not an individual capacity, a power that one has or lacks; it emerges, rather, from a relation of mutual dependence, where power cannot be easily located and conventional hierarchies can find no firm footing.

## **Worlding**

In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929-30), philosopher Martin Heidegger proposes a set of three deceptively simple theses: “The stone (material object) is *worldless*; the animal is *poor in world*; man is *world-forming*” (177). Three forms of being—object, animal, and human—are situated in three different relationships to the world, a relationship that Heidegger defines in terms of “having.” The stone has no possible access to worldly experience: an inanimate object, it simply sits upon the earth. The lizard, as a living being, has a form of relationship to the world; the rock that serves as its bed and the sun whose warmth it seeks are given to it in a partial way, but the lizard remains “captivated,” bound in particular and inflexible relationships



of utility with other beings in its immediate environment. Only human existence (*Dasein*) can grasp the world in its essence and fullness and apprehend its occupants as such, able to transcend the rigid captivation of the nonhuman animal.

Heidegger claims that these statements are rooted in ontological difference, not hierarchy. Although the animal state of being poor in world does represent a deprivation in comparison with the human state of world-forming, it is not necessarily a lesser state. Yet as many scholars note, it is difficult to take seriously Heidegger's claim to ontological neutrality when his focus is set squarely upon humanity as an exceptional form of being.<sup>18</sup> The metaphysical aim of the three theses is to establish two forms of essential ontological difference: between the animal and the human, and between the living and the non-living being (Heidegger 179). In his philosophical framework, a stone has nothing; an animal has an environment; but only humanity (or "man") has the privilege of access to the world in all its richness.

Heidegger's theses stand in stark contrast to the writings of his contemporary, biologist Jakob von Uexküll. In *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (1934), Uexküll invites his readers to join him on "a walk into unknown worlds" (41):

We begin such a stroll on a sunny day before a flowering meadow in which insects buzz and butterflies flutter, and we make a bubble around each of the animals living in the meadow. The bubble represents each animal's environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject... A new world arises in each bubble. (43)

Uexküll's task is to reveal, through attentive observation of the phenomena beyond human perception, that every living creature has a world of its own, a rich multisensory experience that may be far different from, but is no less perfect than, a human's. Strolling with Uexküll

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<sup>18</sup> See Derrida *Animal* Chapter 4, Calarco Chapter 1, and Agamben Chapters 12-16 for critical readings of Heidegger's famous theses. All three give Heidegger credit for attempting to think the animal's experience of world non-hierarchically, but suggest that when it comes to animals, the philosopher tends to think in line with the humanist metaphysical tradition.

means provincializing human embodiment in order to recognize the world's lively diversity: an animal as lowly as a tick becomes, in his account, the star of a thrilling drama of survival. The worlds of other beings, he argues, must be approached on their own terms; readers must open themselves to a different sensorium, alternate modes of communication, a foreign set of values and desires. Uexküll's strolls, rooted in scientific inquiry, are science, not fiction; at the same time, "as with all things otherworldly, this invitation involves a bit of speculation" (Buchanan 2). Where Heidegger sees the animal's experience of its environment as the end of a philosophical journey—the answer to the question "how are humans and animals essentially different?"—Uexküll sees it as the beginning of one, dwelling extensively and thoughtfully on the question "what is it like to be a different kind of being?"

The difference between these two accounts of nonhuman worlds, one closed, one open, helps articulate the notion of worlding that guides this project. "Worlding" is an intervention, both grammatical and ethical, into the commonplace understanding of the world as a fixed object, a field upon which activity takes place. Worlding proposes that the world is not simply given but made in the encounters between beings: the term, Rob Wilson writes, functions as an "active-force gerund" that "would turn nouns (world) to verbs (worlding), thus shifting the taken-for-granted and normal life-forms of the market and war into the to-be-generated and remade" (212). Worlding is the becoming, rather than the being, of the world and its denizens engaged in ongoing and complex interactions.<sup>19</sup> In my project, worlding also means recognizing and exploring the diversity of worldly experience beyond that of human beings. These texts and

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<sup>19</sup> In their edited volume *The Worlding Project*, Christopher Leigh Connery and Rob Wilson explain the critical genealogy of "worlding" at UC Santa Cruz as an intervention into the totalizing forces of globalization, an alternative conception of transnational networks of knowledge, culture, affect, and power. Unlike the fixed grid of globalization, worlding is "a diverse historical process of world-formation and life-world building-up" (Wilson 211).

my readings of them participate in animal, object, and posthuman worldings; they venture into the experiences of beings whose world is crucially different from “the” world of Heidegger’s theses, and from “the” world delineated by dominant accounts of gender, species, and subjectivity. Here, the animal is not poor in world; the stone is not worldless. These speculative fictions allow nonhumans of all kinds to be “everywhere full partners in worlding, in becoming with” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 301).

SF has a special relationship to worlding. As a genre, “the adventure in worlding, the adventure of thinking, called SF” (Haraway, “SF” 9) is often defined by formal experiments in worldbuilding, the construction of an imaginary world or universe with its own history, geography, ecology, and culture. The richness and infinite novelty of SF’s imagined worlds contribute to the genre’s popular fascination and intense readability; for some critics, worldbuilding also figures as escapism, a juvenile refusal to deal with the “real world.” The charge of escapism implies that imaginative work is a closed circuit, whose impact ends as soon as the book is closed or the screen switched off. Yet SF scholars have long argued that worldbuilding is indeed a form of worlding—that exploring imaginative alternatives to reality is a vital and politically urgent mode of participating in it. Darko Suvin, writing in the early days of SF scholarship, emphasizes the genre’s powerful ability to intervene in the status quo: “SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to *cognitive* glance” (375)—that is, subject to “a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author’s environment” (377). SF, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. argues, “is not a genre of aesthetic entertainment only, but a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future” (4),

a site to work through possibilities. Imarisha and adrienne maree brown insist that SF is not “just” storytelling; they draw upon the genre’s openness to develop concrete strategies toward real-world social justice. “Whenever we try to imagine a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism,” Imarisha notes, “we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction” (3). SF texts range from explicitly activist to tentatively exploratory, from blithely utopian to coldly dystopian, evoking every possible politics. What they share is their generic capacity to world the unknown, to give life to new and surprising becomings.

## **Chapters: the cyborg and the beast**

Each chapter of this project explores the representation of nonhuman agency in a text or pair of texts. The four chapters separate into two parts, each concerned with one vector of the infinitely multiple field of the nonhuman. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on artificial, machinic life as an alternative to humanity; their mascot is the cyborg, a mixture of organic and inanimate matter with uncertain life status. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on animals and animality as a second alternative to humanity; their mascot is the beast, a creature with its own worldly desires and perceptions who nonetheless finds itself subject to human decrees. However, wires and tendrils cross and tangle over these two parts, as different forms of “otherness” (femininity, animality, and objectivity) tend to be mapped onto one another in the dominant discourses that persist in these texts.

The two parts also roughly correspond to the project’s two bodies of literature: French Decadence of the late nineteenth century (the focus of Chapters 1 and 2) and science/speculative

fiction of the mid-to-late twentieth century (the focus of Chapters 3 and 4). The work of British author Angela Carter, poised uniquely in both literary realms, serves as the project's generic hinge. Carter wrote in the second half of the twentieth century and is often categorized within feminist magical realism and fairy tale. But with its lavish style, *fin-de-siècle* settings, and intertextual references, her work often draws heavily upon the Decadent literary imaginary. In Chapter 2, Carter encounters Decadent novelist Villiers de l'Isle-Adam via their kindred novels of cyborg women; in Chapter 3, she joins with postmodern French writer Marie Darrieussecq to explore the worlds of monstrous woman-animal hybrids. Carter's work thus performs a connecting function that is both thematic and formal, suggesting a kind of neo-Decadence that develops the bizarre possibilities of Decadent literature and sets them loose among the new technologies and the sex and gender politics of modernity.

I begin the project with a controversial fin-de-siècle French classic, Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), to trace a Decadent "pre-posthumanism"—an unconventional, perverse mode of affirming the agency of those beings and things designated as nonhuman. Chapter 1, "Decadent Posthumanism: Loving the Object in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*," argues that the novel, in a deliberately difficult and ambivalent fashion, presents an alternative to the gendered, anthropocentric hierarchy of (masculine) human author versus (feminine) nonhuman text and, more broadly, of human subject versus nonhuman object. With ambiguous irony, Rachilde's novel cites and manipulates nineteenth-century medical discourses of hysteria. By asserting the viability of a kind of "hysterical authorship," *Monsieur Vénus* recognizes the passive, pathologized forms of agency exerted by those who are feminized and dehumanized by patriarchal humanist norms; in doing so, it anticipates the twenty-first century concerns of queer, feminist,

and posthumanist scholarship.

The second chapter, “Eves of the Future: Cyborg Gender in Villiers’s *L’Eve future* and Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*,” bridges Decadent and contemporary speculative fiction texts, unraveling the complex intertextual relationship between two stories of cyborg women. *L’Eve future* (1886) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) each present gender, particularly femininity, as an artificial technology rather than an authentic feature of humanity, introducing a “thingness” into the heart of what it means to be human. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Haraway’s politics of the cyborg, I link the novels’ suggestion of “cyborg gender” to urgent present-day struggles for transgender recognition and equality. Each novel centers on an artificial woman constructed so perfectly as to pass for real; but I focus my reading instead on the novels’ array of marginal women, characters who fail to qualify as “real” according to the patriarchal norms that govern their world and are thus charged with inauthenticity and deception. Though both texts give voice to a discourse that casts women as subhuman artificial beings, I argue that through these marginal women, the novels articulate the resistant possibilities of cyborg gender, which allows both for more flexible gender expression and for a more diverse, open understanding of what it means to count as an authentic person.

In the third chapter, “Woman/Animal/Object: Monstrous Agency in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* and Darrieussecq’s *Truismes*,” I discuss two feminist speculative fictions that make explicit connections between women, animals, and objects. *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Truismes* (1996) tell stories of hybrid women poised between humanity and animality, struggling to define themselves against overdetermining discourses that judge both women and animals as consumable (sexual, edible, and freak) objects. Interrogating the longstanding trope that

links women and animals in the patriarchal imagination, these novels insist on specific, material connections between forms of objectification based on gender and on species. Turning to the intersectional feminism of Carol Adams, I argue that these texts affirm a politics and ethics of monstrosity as a positive difference from, not a failure to achieve, the human norm. Though feminine monstrosity is a highly ambivalent prospect—by marking a woman as other than human, it renders her especially vulnerable to exploitation—it also offers a way out of the oppressive patriarchal norms that define both femininity and humanity.

In my final chapter, “Cyborg Companion Species: Stapledon’s *Sirius* and Bakis’s *Lives of the Monster Dogs*,” I bring together two science fiction novels about technologically modified dogs who are doubly denied agency by virtue of their animality as well as their status as human-made research objects. Cyborg animals serve as a literal illustration of Descartes’s proposal that animals are organic machines and thus can be exploited without compunction, but the techno-beasts of *Sirius* (1944) and *Lives of the Monster Dogs* (1997) demonstrate their own kind of recalcitrance: neither as animals nor as human-made tools can they be as rigorously instrumentalized as humanist logic would insist. Drawing on discourses of animal ethics and rights, as well as the particular shared history of humans and dogs, this chapter considers love—between humans and animals, between women and men—as a form of domestication, understood in the sense articulated by Vinciane Despret: not as dominion of one by the other, but as a process of co-evolution and mutual exchange. Through their representation of interspecies companionship, I argue, these novels insist on the value and necessity of an alternative kind of agency, emerging not from human values such as autonomy, intelligence, and rationality, but from the state of being for and belonging to a beloved other.

Together, these chapters build toward a notion of worlding as collaboration—between humans, animals, and machines; between genders; between storytellers and stories, authors and texts. The kind of collaboration that makes sense for a more-than-human world must empower vulnerable beings and pay attention to silenced voices. But it must also valorize vulnerability, submission, and passivity for all kinds of beings bound in interdependent relations: even humans, planetary sculptors of the Anthropocene, are made by, with, and for their fellow beings, human and nonhuman. The project to understand the world as a complex network of interspecies collaborators recalls, once again, Le Guin’s fictional scholars on their quest to locate authorship throughout the nonhuman world. “It will be immensely difficult. That is clear,” writes the President of the Association of Therolinguistics. “But we should not despair” (210). Listening, noticing, receiving, paying attention: these passive actions are hard work, especially for a species so historically intent on doing. But this is the work required to bring a new kind of world into being, a world alive with fellow agents co-authoring a vast, complex, and ongoing text. Guided by the unfettered imagination of speculative fiction, this project takes a small step toward that lively world.



# CHAPTER I

## Decadent Posthumanism: Loving the Object in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*

### Prologue: “un unique monstre”

In a moment toward the end of Rachilde's 1884 novel *Monsieur Vénus*, an entwined couple waltzes across the dance floor, the center of attention at the most distinguished social event of the season. One dancer is Jacques Silvert, an impoverished would-be artist; the other is Raoule de Vénérande, his wealthy patroness and the host of the ball. A crowd of onlookers gape and gossip at the thrillingly scandalous scene:

Il valsait bien, ce manant, et son corps souple, aux ondulations féminines, semblait moulé pour cet exercice gracieux. Il ne cherchait pas à soutenir sa danseuse, mais il ne formait avec elle qu'une taille, qu'un buste, qu'un être. A les voir pressés, tournoyants et fondus dans une étreinte où les chairs, malgré leurs vêtements, se collaient aux chairs, on s'imaginait la seule divinité de l'amour en deux personnes, l'individu *complet* dont parlent les récits fabuleux des brahmanes, deux sexes distincts en un unique monstre. (54)

This yokel waltzed well, and his supple body, with its feminine undulations, seemed made for this graceful exercise. He did not try to hold his partner, but made himself

part of her, one waist, one torso, one being. To see them pressed together turning round and round and melting into an embrace where their flesh, despite their clothes, molded together, one could picture the single divinity of love in two people, that *complete* individual spoken of in the fabulous tales of Brahmins, two distinct sexes in one unique monster. (Hawthorne 155)

In keeping with the troubled liaison of Raoule and Jacques, this moment combines romance and monstrosity, concisely illustrating the ways this relationship differs significantly from the norm. This dance is, first, a defiant performance of the couple's impropriety, a willful affront to the eyes of the bourgeois public: Jacques's working-class status and his unmanly beauty make him an ineligible partner for Raoule, who herself is socially suspect due to her androgyny and sexual brazenness. Furthermore, the categorical binaries that should divide them sharply—the man from the woman, the leader from the follower—dissolve into indistinction, as the lines demarcating one gender and one body from the other become curiously blurred.

Raoule and Jacques's version of that fabulous "*complete* individual" serves first to bring out the queer potential of the mythical origin of love described in Plato's *Symposium*; the hybrid mixture of two individuals, each ambiguously gendered to begin with, wreaks havoc upon a sex/gender system that depends on the strict opposition between masculine and feminine. Here, that opposition becomes porously dialectic: for the monster that is Raoule-plus-Jacques, masculine and feminine are two sides of the same being, impossible to differentiate. And as the gender binary dissolves, so too does the logic of domination and submission contained within it. Neither Jacques, the (socially designated) male partner, nor Raoule, the wealthy and more masculine female partner, is "leading" this dance; neither seizes the opportunity to dominate the other. Instead they melt together into one dazzling embrace, the lowly, passive, and feminine elements of their being existing and thriving alongside what is powerful, active, and masculine.

*Monsieur Vénus* describes what seems by and large to be an unequal, coercive, and abusive relationship. Raoule comes to possess Jacques as her “mistress” and then her “wife,” turning him into a feminized object for her own pleasure and finally orchestrating his death. The attraction between them is decidedly unlike what might exist between equals—impossible from the start, since she (true to Decadent custom) is the wealthy descendent of a fading noble lineage, he a shabby working-class pseudo-artist. Their relationship evokes, in a gender-inverted form, the familiar hierarchy between aristocrat and courtesan, a problematic class dynamic that plays an undeniable role in Raoule’s transformation of her lover and makes their relationship legible (though improper) within the bourgeois social context evoked in the novel. Yet the dance that joins them into a “unique monster” illustrates an alternative principle at work: the principle of intersubjectivity rather than hierarchy, of mutual co-constitution rather than opposition and domination.

The dance offers, in fact, a glimpse of an obscure kind of power that emerges unexpectedly out of powerlessness. Jacques—poor, gauche, indecently feminine and delicately beautiful—embodies that powerlessness, which is highlighted in this scene by the disapproving gaze of the crowd of high-society onlookers. And yet without intending to, he does something to them, exerts a mesmerizing force that seems to arise precisely out of, not in spite of, his weakness.

Ils allaient se replier en masse pour prouver leur mépris à cet obscur barbouilleur de myosotis lorsqu'ils ressentirent en même temps une commotion bizarre qui les cloua sur place. Jacques, la tête renversée, avait encore son sourire de fille amoureuse; ses lèvres relevées laissaient voir ses dents de nacre, ses yeux, agrandis d'un cercle bleuâtre, conservaient une humidité rayonnante, et, sous ses cheveux épais, sa petite oreille, épanouie comme une fleur de pourpre, leur donna, à tous, le même tressaut inexplicable. (55)

They were about to move off en masse to show their contempt for this obscure dauber of forget-me-nots when they all felt at the same time a bizarre commotion that riveted them to the spot. Jacques, his head thrown back, still had his smile of a young girl in love; his open lips showed off his pearly teeth; his eyes, enhanced by bluish circles, maintained a glistening radiance; and under his thick hair, his delicate ears, opening like some purple flower, made all of them shiver inexplicably at once. (Hawthorne 157-158)

As object of the gaze, Jacques—feminine, ornamental, floral—is marked as a non-agent by the conventions of power that structure the scene. As the very opposite of a properly masculine subject, he should be despicable, and yet the onlookers cannot despise him, cannot help but desire him; his beauty overwhelms and dissolves normal hierarchies of gender and class. What Jacques demonstrates here is not power, the ability to act upon another, but rather a curious non-power, a passivity that nonetheless reduces the formidable crowd to impotence. It is this passive agency, this riveting “bizarre commotion,” that guides my reading of this novel.

## **“Je fais tout le contraire de ce que j'ai promis”: reading the Decadent writer**

Rachilde, one of few women writing in late nineteenth-century France, is not as often remembered as her male contemporaries. Building upon the notoriety achieved by the publication of *Monsieur Vénus*, she carves out a lengthy and successful career in a society largely inhospitable to literary women. As a prolific writer, host of a popular salon, and editor at the *Mercure de France* publishing house, Rachilde exerts considerable influence in the literary circles of her day. She is thus a key figure for the late nineteenth-century cultural tendency—for “movement” would be too precise a term—known as Decadence. The label “Decadent,” etymologically

linked to decay, is used first as a negative critical classification, signaling the moral, cultural, psychological, and somatic decline of writers dismissed as social deviants by the mainstream. Some nineteenth-century writers, like Anatole Baju, founder of the journal *Le Décadent*, ironically claim the disparaging word as a rallying cry, remobilizing it in celebration of nonconformity and degeneracy (Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky 12). Yet as Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky note, it remains an open question “whether Decadence should be called a school, a movement, a cultural phenomenon, or even an identifiable phase of literary and cultural history” (29 n.10); it is too vaguely defined and too often repudiated to name a distinct kind of writing or writer. Indeed, the vagueness of the term contributes, Charles Bernheimer argues, to its “valuable subversive agency” (4): it takes shape only in the negative, as an opposition to social norms that claim themselves as “natural.”<sup>1</sup> Employed cautiously, and without claim to certainty, “Decadence” acts as a useful set of threads knotting together a spatially and temporally disparate group of defiantly unwholesome and anti-social cultural works.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite Rachilde’s extensive catalogue of work and her influence upon a range of *fin-de-siècle* writers, she tends not to garner a spot in the Decadent canon; nor has she been widely reclaimed by the feminist literary tradition. Over a century of critics have been unsure quite what to make of Rachilde; the broad scholarly trend, Rita Felski notes, has been to dismiss her as “a minor and overly sensationalist writer of the decadent movement” (179). In the last two decades or so, however, Rachilde has attracted the attention of more generous readers. Current scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> This oppositional quality suggests a linguistic kinship between “Decadent” and “queer,” a relationship that registers more generally as well. Sexual deviance, whether pathologized or celebrated, figures significantly in the discourse of Decadence. Many writers associated with Decadence were homosexual, bisexual, and/or gender-non-normative—most famously Oscar Wilde, tried and imprisoned for “gross indecency” with men.

<sup>2</sup> The characteristic movement or trope of Decadent writing is perversion, in its fullest sense: “perversion” comes from the Latin roots *per-* ‘away entirely, to destruction, to the bad’ + *vertere* ‘to turn’ (OED). It indicates a willful, even spiteful turning away from what is normal, expected, or efficient, especially with regard to sexuality.

works through the nuances of her writing, focusing especially on the tangled discursive threads of gender and sexuality that characterize her oeuvre. Her work, with its fiercely unconventional heroines, gender-bending romantic pairings, and explicit challenges to patriarchal violence, offers much potential for feminist and queer readings. At the same time, it also refuses to fit into any coherent political project, tending to entangle feminism with misogyny, queerness with virulent homophobia, and liberation with cruelty. Like her obstinate antiheroine Raoule, who proudly announces, “Je fais tout le contraire de ce que j'ai promis” (“I do the complete opposite of what I've promised; 25; Hawthorne 64-65), Rachilde seems to declare a total indifference to social expectations of any sort.

Feminist scholarship must deal, for instance, with Rachilde's vocal hostility toward feminist politics. As a controversial woman in a male-dominated field (and society), Rachilde is labeled a feminist during her own lifetime by her critics; but she is loudly derisive of the feminist movement and of individual female activists. As Diana Holmes points out, Rachilde approves of individual women (like herself) challenging the fetters of patriarchal authority, but “loathes the idea of female solidarity in a collective cause” (77); she even publishes a 1928 pamphlet entitled *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (*Why I am not a feminist*). This explicit denunciation poses methodological obstacles to critics. As Felski points out, “we need to take her at her word” and consider the ways her work opens up toward feminist directions “without forcing it into a feminist straitjacket that the author herself consistently repudiated” (180).<sup>3</sup> Alison Finch takes

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars agree that Rachilde tended to deplore political causes of all kinds, with one exception: she did participate in the anti-vivisection and animal protection movement. Michael Finn traces how this anti-vivisection work led to Rachilde's political alliance with certain radical feminists, despite their disagreements on other counts (see Finn “Dogs and females”). Vivisection was an explicitly feminist issue in the late nineteenth century: feminist activists drew parallels between the degraded status of animals, subject to the vivisectioning scalpel, and women, subject to the invasive and dehumanizing methods employed in hysteria research. As Ceri Crossley explains, “in the eyes of feminists the vivisectioner became the very embodiment of male authority, penetrating and destroying nature, blind to

this approach by situating Rachilde's work within the context of a long tradition of women's writing in nineteenth-century France, in order to appreciate both her variations upon and her violent backlash against specifically "female" literary themes (208).<sup>4</sup>

In a similar fashion, queer scholarship, drawn to the proliferation of ambiguously gendered and sexed beings in Rachilde's work, must deal with the eternal ambivalence of these characters. In the French *fin-de-siècle* context of Rachilde's writing, lesbianism and male homosexuality do exist as acknowledged cultural categories, but only as pathological deviations from the norm, and Rachilde does little to explicitly reframe those narratives. Dominique Fisher argues that Rachilde's deployment of homosexuality in her texts serves to cite, rather than dispute, the misogyny and heterosexism of the dominant order; the figure of the lesbian, for instance, is characteristically spectralized, appearing only as what is absent and repudiated (298).<sup>5</sup> Her work is especially problematic, Lisa Downing notes, if one is looking for "positive representations" of non-normative sexual subjects. On the contrary, Rachilde "wallows in their deviancy, maintaining them as perverted, death-driven, and 'other'" (Downing 24).

But if we turn away from the simplicity of a "positive" reading, a text like *Monsieur Vénus* becomes not only a useful object for queer scholarship, but a foundational text. That is, values other than those associated with the onward march of science" (209). Chapter 3 of this dissertation will delve more deeply into the longstanding cultural trope that links women and animals, to oppressive as well as liberatory ends. The fascinating, frustrating status of animality in Rachilde's work and in Decadent writing more generally is a topic I plan to pursue in future work.

<sup>4</sup> Finch suggests, for instance, that reading *Monsieur Vénus* only as a Decadent work obscures its sardonic critique of the "peculiarly nineteenth-century brand of sexism" suffered and represented by prior women writers (210). She also notes that Rachilde makes explicit the topic of female homosexuality, bisexuality, and androgyny, tentatively hinted at by her predecessors (210-211).

<sup>5</sup> Here Fisher draws upon Terry Castle's notion of the "apparitional lesbian." Castle describes a longstanding cultural trope of the lesbian as a kind of "ghost effect": not a solid, worldly being, but "a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night," haunting, but never actually appearing (2). Similarly, Fisher argues, the figure of the lesbian haunts Rachilde's work, but can only take shape through the mediation of contemporary cliché.

a queer theoretical framework helps us make sense of *Monsieur Vénus* at the same time that *Monsieur Vénus* helps us make sense of queer theory. “Queer” in this sense acts not as a particular category or identity that would name a list of non-heterosexual orientations. The term rather “mark[s] a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (Doty 3); it functions as an eternal disruption of stable categories of sex, gender, and desire—as non-normativity itself, challenging norms of all kinds rather than substituting one norm for another.

In relation to this notion of “queer,” Rachilde’s difficulty begins to seem productive, rather than off-putting. Considering how and whether to include Rachilde in a proposed queer literary canon—itsself a vexing and perhaps paradoxical concept—Katherine Gantz suggests that there is something specifically non-canonical about Rachilde’s work, even for a self-consciously different kind of canon; she fancifully imagines the writer’s indignation at being incorporated into the “pantheon of the Writers Now Queered” (113). This speculative exercise begins to get at what is so valuable about this difficult author: her constitutive refusal to fit into any kind of category or stable position. She forces would-be queer theoreticians to figure out how to work with the weird, troubling, unpredictable aspects of non-normativity without resolving them into known categories—how to keep “queer” dangerously, seductively open. Downing writes that “a queer (as opposed to straight feminist, or LGBT) reading of Rachilde, especially one which embraces the anti-social turn in queer theory, allows the violence of her textuality and ideas to stand as a forceful dismantling of the normative discursive cornerstones of her epoch” (24).<sup>6</sup> Her

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<sup>6</sup> To explain the “anti-social turn in queer theory,” Downing refers in particular to Lee Edelman, who links queerness with the refusal of the dominant ideology of reproductive futurity. Raoule is characteristic of Rachilde’s “death-driven” female characters, for whom sex is a perverse and deadly, rather than reproductive, act.



epoch, and our own: the queering of sex and gender in *Monsieur Vénus* may still puzzle or shock the savvy modern reader. With few exceptions, non-normative sex and gender practices have not reached mainstream discourse, a situation that speaks to the slow pace of social change and the deep social roots of heterosexism, but also to the deliberate non-canoncity of the radically queer. Against the tendency of gay and lesbian culture to assimilate to hegemonic cultural norms (what Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity”), *Monsieur Vénus* might serve as a reminder of what can be productive about the consciously marginal, exasperatingly unassimilable queer.<sup>7</sup>

As these modern critics demonstrate, though it takes significant work to place Rachilde within established traditions of feminist and queer scholarship, her potential contribution to these fields is irresistible; and so I situate myself alongside the scholars committed to working gingerly through the political and ethical difficulties in her texts in the hopes of accessing the radical promise contained within her dead-set ambivalence. I suggest that posthumanist theory, informed by theories of gender and sexuality, offers itself as another, though less obvious, critical path through *Monsieur Vénus*. Questioning the coherence, self-evidence, and value of “the human” that so often serves as the guiding concept of worldly affairs, posthumanism explores the overlaps and boundary-crossings between the categories of human and nonhuman, whose strict and hierarchical delineation is so crucial to an anthropocentric world view. Among its many interventions (explored throughout this dissertation), posthumanist theory asserts an “originary technicity” of humankind, a fundamental co-constitution between humanity and technology in

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<sup>7</sup> Homonormativity is an extension of heteronormativity, rather than its opposite. Duggan describes homonormativity as a “neoliberal sexual politics... that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions—such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction—but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179).

its many forms. It articulates the extent to which human beings are infected by, and dependent upon, those nonhuman things that are supposed to remain external: machines, objects, systems, even the intimate, seemingly natural technology of language.<sup>8</sup>

Posthumanist theory usually directs its attention toward the postmodern technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which seem to usher in a new era of unprecedented entanglement between human and machine. But a century before the cyborg receives its name, a range of nineteenth-century writers and thinkers, loosely assembled within the slippery category of Decadence, mull over the possibility of rejecting nature and embracing artificial, simulated being. More than a simple commodity fetishism, the Decadent obsession with objects conveys, Stefana Forlini argues, “a belief in the power of material inanimate things to transform the human body and an understanding of human existence as materially distributed across bodies and things” (199). The Decadent imagination thus provides an unexpected site for posthumanist visions to flourish; it suggests ways to think differently about the relationships between persons and objects and the boundary separating human from nonhuman. *Monsieur Vénus*, in its own stubborn way, engages with this thinking, in a mode I call “Decadent posthumanism.” The novel makes no reference to science, technology, or “the future”; indeed, its characters seem hopelessly stuck in an ancient and crumbling social regime, with little sense of the imminent changes associated with the *fin-de-siècle*.<sup>9</sup> Yet this text is all about cyborgian possibilities: its central question is,

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Bradley traces a critical genealogy of “originary technicity” through a long history of Western philosophical thought. Originary technicity is a crucial piece of Derrida’s deconstructive approach to “the human”; throughout his work, Derrida points out the many ways that humanity fails to live up to its own self-image and to distinguish itself from its “others.” Language is one deeply-rooted site of this recurrent failure. As Cary Wolfe explains in a posthumanist analysis of Derrida’s work, “‘we’ are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being... in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity” (*Posthumanism* 89).

<sup>9</sup> In this way it differs from its near contemporary, Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Eve future*, a novel I will discuss in Chapter 2. *L’Eve future* stages a confrontation between a reactionary, aristocratic social order and the

how might a man become a thing, and what is the ontological, ethical, and romantic potential of a human-nonhuman hybrid? *Monsieur Vénus* articulates the links between multiple kinds of nonhumanity, the categories that serve as “other” to a patriarchal human subject: the feminine, the animal, and the object. And the novel, like the crowd of onlookers at the ball, occupies a highly ambivalent relation to these modes of the nonhuman: is it desirable or despicable to be like Jacques, and is he a mere victim or in some sense an agent of his passivity?

It is a text, I argue, that demands to be read in a speculative mode, though it resists the thematic category of “speculative fiction.” This speculative reading would take the text at its word, follow it through to its troubling end and consider what it really means for a human to become a thing; it would accept, in a literal sense, that Jacques, “lui cédant sa puissance d’homme amoureux, devint sa chose, une sorte d’être inerte qui se laissait aimer parce qu’il aimait lui-même d’une façon impuissante” (“gave up his power as a man in love and became her thing, a sort of lifeless object who let himself be loved, because his own love was powerless”; 33; Hawthorne 92-93). In this novel, “objectification” and “dehumanization” are not mere metaphors of debasement; instead, they are literal transformations of a human into a nonhuman. Jacques becomes her (feminized) art object—that is, he is both objectified and made into an artwork, a text to be edited and rewritten. I do not read this strange romance as a metaphor for the artistic process: Jacques does not represent a text, he actually is one. Drawing upon the Decadent penchant for artifice over nature, the novel disregards the boundaries that conventionally separate humans from nonhuman objects. What develops between Raoule and Jacques is not a relationship between humans, but a tempestuous romance between a (masculine) artist/author and his/her 

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technophilic mass culture of modernity, though the novel is ambivalent about where to stake its own claim.

(feminine) creation.<sup>10</sup>

The novel thus offers an inverted version of the ancient myth of Pygmalion, a male artist who sculpts his ideal woman out of ivory and, with the help of the gods, brings her to life to be his wife. Pygmalion and his statue-woman (sometimes named Galatea) appear in countless iterations across centuries of art and literature; Ovid's version in *The Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.) is not the first, but among the most influential. In Ovid's poem, Pygmalion, repelled by living women, turns to art: he "made a creature / More beautiful than any girl on earth... So charming that it made him fall in love" (281). The statue compels him not only with her beauty, but with a quality of liveliness unexpected from an inanimate object: "her face was life itself... Was she alive or not? He could not tell. / He kissed her; did her lips respond to his?" (281). Pygmalion shyly prays to the gods to send him a wife "who is as lovely as my work of art" (281); Venus complies by turning "the ivory image that his hands contrived" (281) into a living woman. When Pygmalion fondles the breasts of his creation, he feels "they were as though ivory had turned to wax / And wax to life... The pulse-beat stirring where he moved his hands" (281). The woman awakens without a word, falls instantly in love with Pygmalion, and becomes his wife.<sup>11</sup>

*Monsieur Vénus* shares the myth's basic narrative trajectory; it too narrates the creation and transformation of an ideal lover. But Rachilde inverts both the gender roles and the direction

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<sup>10</sup> "His/her" is a deliberate choice, since Raoule employs a grammar of gender-switching to describe her(?)self throughout the novel.

<sup>11</sup> See Julie Wosk *My Fair Ladies* for an inclusive and diverse genealogy of the longstanding cultural narrative of Pygmalion and Galatea. Barbara Johnson notes its particular resonance within the second half of the nineteenth century, when a poetic movement known as Parnassianism flourished in France. Inspired by Greek mythology, Parnassian poets wrote numerous passionate apostrophes to beautiful but silent statues; French Decadence, Johnson claims, exemplifies "Parnassianism run riot" (119), citing both Rachilde and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam as writers who blur the boundaries between statues and people. The Pygmalion myth will resurface in Chapter 2 as a key intertext for Villiers's *L'Ève future*, which takes a technoscientific (and brutally misogynistic) approach to the project of crafting and animating the ideal woman.

of this trajectory in a movement more complicated than a simple reversal. First, while Pygmalion is a male artist who creates a female statue, Raoule is an ambivalently-masculine female artist who creates an ambivalently-feminine male art object. Both roles, artist and work, are occupied by characters with mercurial and eccentric gender identities that are perhaps most accurately described (in modern terms) as genderqueer or genderfluid; Raoule and Jacques each pick and choose what aspects of discursive masculinity and femininity to embody and perform at a given moment.<sup>12</sup> Second, while Pygmalion animates the inanimate, Raoule de-animates the living. Or, to be more precise, she moves Jacques from the realm of the fully human to the realm of strangely lively inanimacy that Pygmalion's statue inhabits before her divine animation—the statue whose “face was life itself” though she (or it) was carved from cold, dead ivory.<sup>13</sup>

Multiply inverting an age-old trope, the liaison between Raoule and Jacques, though riddled with deeply troubling violence, offers an unexpected critique of the structures of patriarchal power. *Monsieur Vénus* focuses on the relationship between an artist and a text in a way that explicitly acknowledges the text as a lively object, an inanimate thing that is nevertheless a force to be reckoned with. Jacques's transformation reveals, on the one hand, how a human might function as an object rather than a person, and on the other hand, how an *objet d'art*

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<sup>12</sup> Gantz offers a possible “postmodern assessment” of Raoule and Jacques's gender identities as, respectively, “stone butch” and “proto-pre-op” (129). Her point is not to impose stable queer labels on these characters but to reveal, through the complexities of the suggested identities, the necessity of flexible and open queer discourse. *Monsieur Vénus* queers sex and gender conventions by disaggregation, not reversal: “It is the work of separating elements understood as part of a gendered whole that precisely represents the act of queering” (Gantz 129).

<sup>13</sup> Notably, ivory is a material harvested from the living or once-living body of an animal, usually an elephant. It is an example of what Erica Fudge calls “animal matter,” the animals-turned-into-objects that circulate through and enable human culture. In the special liveliness of animal matter, Fudge locates “the power of the non-human animal to effect change upon so-called human culture even when the animal as sentient presence has been removed” (89-90). Bruce Holsinger notes that the human textual tradition depends upon the animals whose skins became parchment; he challenges medieval studies to confront the fact that “medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, nothing but millions of stains on animal parts” (619). The Pygmalion myth does not acknowledge that the beloved is birthed from a tusk; yet could there be a relationship between the statue-woman's elephant “ancestor” and her unexpected inanimate liveliness?

might work back upon its creator in unexpected ways. The novel heavily cites, but also messily revamps, conventional structures of domination that privilege masculine over feminine, human over animal, subject over object, and author over text. It highlights the connections between agency and authorship: the authorial agent is the one with the power to act, to make and master the passive other. But notions of agency become extremely complicated as dichotomies of gender, power, and species are not simply inverted, but rather put under constant, capricious revision. Jacques the thing—submissive, vulnerable, inanimate—also exerts a kind of agency through passivity, while Raoule the master—dominant, powerful, scheming—is also subject to various forces (animality, femininity, and disease) that compromise her agency.

In *Monsieur Vénus*, activity and passivity, those seeming opposites, are inextricably intertwined. What links them is hysteria, which in the novel's *fin-de-siècle* context must be understood as not a straightforward medical condition, but rather a cluster of vexing questions about gender, species, and rationality. Hysteria provides a way to designate femininity as itself pathological, in need of constant supervision lest it explode into frenzied excess. Hysterical women are diagnosed as bestial, irrational objects to be tamed and made legible by patriarchal discourses. The disease thus functions to reject femininity, animality, and objecthood from the healthy human norm. But here, hysterical discourse is twisted in a different direction. The novel appropriates hysteria as the means available, in its cultural milieu, to powerfully acknowledge the force of all that is deemed hysterically subhuman. Instead of letting the abnormal get rejected or rehabilitated, it insists that it remain on the scene, a disquieting presence counteracting hegemonic fantasies of total authority and control. Thus the feminine becomes a constitutive presence in the masculine, the animal in the human, the object in the subject. This chapter returns to a fuller

discussion of hysteria as the novel's organizing force; first, I look closely at the complex tangle of love, authority, and authorship that constitutes the partnership of Raoule and Jacques.

## **Inventing vice: Raoule the artist**

The character of Raoule de Vénérande embodies a number of tropes often associated with Decadent writing. Indeed, she has much in common with the man often considered the prototypical Decadent figure: Jean des Esseintes, the protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À rebours*.<sup>14</sup> Like des Esseintes, Raoule is a solitary aristocrat, the last of her wayward line. Even her name signifies perversion and decay: her first name Raoule conjures a masculinity inappropriate for a woman, while her family name de Vénérande paradoxically evokes both *vénéral* (to venerate) and *vénéral* (venereal). And like des Esseintes, Raoule is prone to nervous hysteria and sexual deviance, obsessed with gloomy ornamentation and the triumph of artifice over nature. Des Esseintes retreats from bourgeois Parisian society to construct an entirely artificial private world, programming every sensory experience to his precise satisfaction. Anything natural he regards as vulgar and boring; "l'artifice paraissait à des Esseintes la marque distinctive du génie de l'homme" ("artifice was in Des Esseintes' philosophy the distinctive mark of human genius"; 31; trans. 104). Raoule takes a similarly dismissive approach to the conventional operations of both nature and society. But in her case, gender adds a certain urgency

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<sup>14</sup> *À Rebours* and *Monsieur Venus* are published within a span of about two months in 1884. The relationship between the novels is somewhat unclear. Hawthorne notes that "contrary to some assertions, there is nothing to suggest that Rachilde was influenced by this novel" (*Rachilde* 243 n.3). Finn claims that the epistolary record between the two writers and their mutual acquaintances reveals the contrary, and that Rachilde's characteristically whirlwind writing pace makes it a reasonable possibility that she read *À Rebours* upon its publication in mid-May and had her own novel written and published by June (*Hysteria* 161-163). Certainly, the narrative and aesthetic similarities between the two yields interesting comparisons, not the least of which is the widespread canonization of Huysmans and the relative obscurity of Rachilde.

to the idle whims of a spoiled aristocrat. Artifice enables her to disassemble and reconstruct the “natural” order that, as a woman, she finds drearily oppressive. Specifically, Raoule intervenes in an aesthetic tradition that casts men as artists and women as art. By declaring herself an artist, a Pygmalion in her own right, she authorizes herself to creatively experiment, defying not just aesthetic but also social, biological, and erotic conventions.

Artistic production structures the relationship between Raoule and Jacques, which begins as an encounter between artist and patron and only accidentally becomes an erotically charged encounter between a man and a woman. Ironically, when Raoule first approaches Jacques, it is to procure his own services as an artist—or rather, the services of his sister, “*Marie Silvert, fleuriste, dessinateur*” (“*Marie Silvert, flower maker, designer*”; 7; Hawthorne 7)—for the construction of an elaborate gown. As Marie is sick in bed, Jacques explains, “pour le moment, Marie Silvert, c’est moi” (“for the time being, I’m Marie Silvert”; 7; Hawthorne 9). Jacques’s casual willingness to switch identity and gender according to Raoule’s needs proves a fitting origin point for their prolonged liaison, during which gender and authorship are self-consciously unstable categories. Jacques offers himself up as a (substitute) artist for a wealthy patron; through a process of violently ardent transformation, he is reconstituted as Raoule’s *objet d’art*.

Though Jacques identifies himself as an artist at the novel’s beginning, he cannot hold on to that distinction for long; it is Raoule who establishes herself as the main creative force in their partnership. Both her personal life and her own artistic endeavors (which include painting and fashion) are rigorously governed by the principle of invention, rather than imitation. Her entire identity—her gender, sexuality, and social conduct—is the result of careful craftsmanship, based on years of study. It is designed to maximally provoke and confound her bourgeois milieu,



the respectable upper class into which she is born by virtue of her Vénérande lineage. The novel registers this impropriety against the backdrop of its social context: there is always someone watching, judging, and attempting to constrain Raoule's actions. Her aunt and guardian, Mme Ermengarde, a devout, virginal, and charitable old woman, voices the imperative to uphold one's moral, familial, and gender responsibilities. Her friend and spurned suitor, the Baron de Raittolbe, serves as representative of the rakish idle rich, extolling the pleasures of sexual hedonism behind closed doors. Both, in different ways, are dedicated to the project of bourgeois respectability, and they emphatically urge Raoule to uphold gender and class norms—she can indulge her little quirks (a privilege of the wealthy), but should ultimately demonstrate proper upper-class femininity.

But the recalcitrant Raoule invents herself in deliberate opposition to those norms—indeed, to any norms. Her creative self-authorship begins in childhood, when she discovers the world of sexuality and depravity via a book in her aunt's library; soon after, her perverse and inexplicable behavior gets her officially diagnosed as a “cas spécial” (“special case”) by the doctors to whose examinations she refuses to submit.<sup>15</sup> As one confides to his colleague, “Elle ne connaît pas le vice, mais elle l'invente!” (“She doesn't know vice, yet she invents it!”; 12; Hawthorne 27). This quality of inventiveness, first voiced by the medical establishment as a pathological symptom, is claimed in turn by the adult Raoule as the organizing principle of her life. It is important to her not only to be different—to reject hegemonic codes of proper gender, sex and class behavior—but to be differently different, to fashion a new art and social

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<sup>15</sup> Since the nineteenth-century medical establishment often attributes female hysteria to excessive education, the book as an origin for feminine corruption is an important trope in hysteria discourse, as I will discuss in a subsequent section.

movement with exactly one adherent, employing daring new media and methods of achieving creative depravity.

Thus Raoule conceives of her attachment to Jacques as an utterly new vice, complete with its own singular conventions and even its own grammar. As she explains to Raittolbe, “*je suis amoureux!*” (“*this man is in love!*”; 26; Hawthorne 68)—a linguistic impossibility for a woman, who should be “*amoureuse.*”<sup>16</sup> Raittolbe, although dismayed, is at least unruffled by what he thinks is Raoule’s coming out as a lesbian. But Raoule has something much more esoteric in mind than the “*amours vulgaires*” of schoolgirls and prostitutes: “*être Sapho, ce serait être tout le monde!*” (“*if I were Sappho, I would be like everybody else!*”; 26; Hawthorne 69).<sup>17</sup> What she is undertaking is a project that affords her not only greater pleasure, but greater recognition; this love is not a private affair, but a public work that will cement her reputation as “*l’élite des femmes de notre époque*” (“*the elite of the women of our time*”; 26; Hawthorne 71). She has done her research, surveyed the field, and is now prepared to make her dramatic contribution; notably, she frames her ambitions in textual terms: “*j’ai eu des amants. Des amants dans ma vie comme j’ai des livres dans ma bibliothèque, pour savoir, pour étudier... Mais je n’ai pas eu de passion, je n’ai pas écrit mon livre, moi!*” (“*I have had lovers. Lovers in my life, like books in my library, to learn, to study... But I’ve never had passion, I haven’t written my own book yet!*”; 26; Hawthorne 69-70).

What this artist of the perverse is authoring is not a literal book, but a performative

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<sup>16</sup> Raoule’s playful and confrontational use of gendered nouns and adjectives presents some difficulty in translation from French to English. “*This man is in love!*” loses the specifically grammatical intervention of Raoule’s radical declaration “*je suis amoureux.*”

<sup>17</sup> This passing reference exemplifies the “*spectral lesbian*” described by Castle. Raoule mentions lesbianism only to derisively discount it as *passé*, an unconventional form of homophobia that nonetheless precludes the possibility of lesbian presence. As noted above, there is significant critical frustration with Rachilde’s hostility toward lesbians in this and other novels, an issue discussed by both Fisher and Gantz.

script for her own love life: the invention of a totally new depravity that is literally unspeakable within current regimes of sex and gender. “Je suis *amoureux* d’un homme” (“I’m *a man in love* with a man”; 27; Hawthorne 73), she insists to the increasingly dumbfounded Raittolbe, who, as the paragon of conventional masculinity, cannot grasp how a woman might be a (male) lover to a man, or how that man might be her (female) lover. The typical language of courtship and possession goes topsy-turvy in this conversation, as Raoule contends that she can have sex with a male partner and yet not be “sa maîtresse,” his mistress.<sup>18</sup> As the dominant partner to Jacques, she prefers to call herself “son amant” (“his lover”; 27; Hawthorne 74).<sup>19</sup>

One could read this new nomenclature as a protest against the gender inequality that inheres in romantic vocabulary (which suggests that a man’s “mistress” is his property); but achieving equality as a female lover is not precisely what Raoule has in mind. Her relationship with Jacques is a way for her to articulate her own complicated gender identity, itself a baroque production that pulls together the titles and privileges of masculinity with strategically deployed tropes of femininity. She begins this conversation with Raittolbe, which occurs the day after a thwarted romantic rendez-vous, by explaining why she stood him up: “Rien ne doit vous étonner, puisque je suis femme... Je fais tout le contraire de ce que j’ai promis. Quoi de plus naturel?” (“Nothing ought to astonish you, since I’m a woman... I do the complete opposite of what I’ve promised. What could be more natural?”; 25; Hawthorne 64-65). By citing “natural” female flightiness, Raoule demonstrates a relationship to gender clichés that is both pragmatic and

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<sup>18</sup> The language of mistress versus lover also implies an unconventional relationship of sexual penetration. As Hawthorne explains in her critical introduction to the novel, Jacques is Raoule’s mistress, not just because he is her “kept woman” but also because he is the one who is penetrated in their sexual encounters (xxix).

<sup>19</sup> Suitably for Raoule, “son amant” could equally mean “his lover” or “her lover,” since the possessive pronoun “son” takes the gender of the noun that is possessed, but the lover in question, “amant,” is gendered male.

ironic: the stereotype proves a useful excuse for her misbehavior, even though, coming from such an unconventional woman, it is deliberately unconvincing. As their increasingly confounding discussion of Raoule's love life unfolds, she declares herself "Monsieur de Vénérande," the "man in love," and nevertheless identifies as a specifically female artist, "un échantillon du féminin artiste et du féminin grande dame" ("an example of the artistic feminine and the grand lady"; 26; Hawthorne 71) who situates herself among (if above) a community of exceptionally inventive women.

Thus in a single conversation, Raoule associates herself alternately with conventional femininity, exceptional femininity, and masculinity. Gender acts for her less as a coherent identity than as a strategically spotty "citational network" (Beizer 239), a collection of commonplaces upon which she draws both sincerely and ironically, triumphantly and derisively. This citational quality takes gender as a discursive production, not an inherent essence. The role of hysteria in this novel is discussed in more detail below; here, it suffices to note that hysteria serves as a major discursive source for Raoule's gender identity. Throughout the novel, "everywhere we hear repeated the litany of cliché characteristics (animal-like, sneaky, ardent, perverse, instinctual, nervous, pathological)" that serve as favored hysterical symptoms within the medical literature of the period, proof of femininity as a pathological state (Beizer 239). But the novel's citation of hysteria discourse is never straightforward. Raittolbe unwittingly voices the strategic mobility of the diagnosis when, affronted by Raoule's behavior, he swears "qu'il ne reviendrait jamais chez cette hystérique, car, selon ses idées, on ne pouvait qu'être hystérique dès qu'on ne suivait pas la loi commune" ("that he would never come back to this hysterical woman, for, in his opinion, anyone who did not follow the ordinary rules must be hysterical"; 20; Hawthorne 49). The novel

thus exposes hysteria's dirty secret: it is a disease one attributes to difficult women. "Hysterical," in Raittolbe's sense, functions similarly to the "queer" of queer theory: "queer" defiantly claims and celebrates what "hysterical" seeks to pathologize and condemn, but they both name categories that are fundamentally open, defined by their subversion of "la loi commune" rather than by any particular quality.

That openness, more than any particular qualities of masculinity or femininity, is what constitutes Raoule's gender identity and her desire for Jacques. Her primary purpose is not merely to flout convention. Anyone can break the rules; indeed, certain scandalous exceptions, like lesbianism, have already been codified and contained within social norms. Her more ambitious project is to invent new conventions, new modes of gender, romance, and sex that are philosophically, linguistically, and logistically unthinkable. It is thus that Jacques becomes both canvas and collaborator for her perverse masterpiece.

### **Monsieur Galatée: Jacques the *objet d'art***

Though invested in a discourse of queer self-authorship for herself, Raoule prefers to think of Jacques as one of her own works-in-progress. Returning home from their first encounter, she tells her aunt "J'ai mis la main sur une bonne oeuvre..." ("I have gotten my hands on a good work"; 11).<sup>20</sup> This "good work" is none other than Jacques himself, whose exposed skin Raoule's hand could not resist stroking, though in Raoule's plea to her aunt, the "good work" is the act of charity that will whisk a young *artiste* from poverty and set him up in a proper studio

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<sup>20</sup> My translation. Hawthorne translates this line as "I have come across a charity case" (21), which loses the *double entendre* of the French "bonne oeuvre."

to nurture his budding talent, courtesy of the Vénérande fortune. Jacques's artistry, however, is always in question. While he displays a knack for flower-making, he fails at painting, his self-professed "true" talent; Raoule, who considers herself a superior painter and an authoritative art critic, judges his sheep-ridden landscapes pitiful. It is Jacques's sister, Marie, the florist and prostitute, who supplies a more likely explanation for the noblewoman's interest in her comely brother. When he insists that Mlle de Vénérande sees promise in his work and is acting only as a charitable fellow artist, she pokes fun at his artistic idealism: "Tiens! comme si ta figure ne valait pas celle de tes sales moutons!" ("Come on, as if your face didn't count as much as that of your wretched sheep!"; 14; Hawthorne 30). The worldly Marie thinks she recognizes the terms of a conventional sexual transaction: Jacques's pretty face in exchange for a rich patron's money. But in her joke, she begins to articulate what is different about this particular relationship. Jacques's face is worth more than his paintings: not because sex appeal is worth more than artistic talent, as Marie believes, but because his body is more artful than his paintings; that is, he is desired as an art object as well as a sex object. Raoule indeed acts as a patron of the arts, but Jacques is the art, not the artist: a splendid aesthetic object that she will collect, admire, and mold to her liking.

For Raoule, Jacques's artistic inclinations are merely a pretext, a method of getting her own craftsman's hands on him by giving him a place to "work." She installs him in "his" studio alongside the rest of the decor, his body another ornament to be arranged—"on le mettait chez lui, avec des pinceaux, des couleurs, des tapis, des rideaux, des meubles, du velours, beaucoup de dorures, beaucoup de dentelles..." ("he was set up in a home of his own, with brushes, paints, carpets, curtains, furniture, velvet, a lot of gilt, a lot of lace..."; 13; Hawthorne 29). In this novel, the tendency of Decadent prose to indulge in lengthy descriptions of decor applies

indiscriminately to human and inhuman objects. As Rae Beth Gordon notes, Jacques appears repeatedly in the novel as “a being inseparably intertwined with ornamentation” (230). The trajectory of Jacques’s transformation under Raoule’s influence, his movement from masculinity to femininity, is also a movement from humanity to inanimacy. As he becomes more feminine, he becomes inextricable from his inorganic accoutrements. Descriptions of him often include lavish descriptions of flowers, silks and satins, marble, and jewels; his body is made both metaphorically and metonymically continuous with an array of decorative objects, and his spectacular qualities command admiration from Raoule and other admirers.

An encounter between the steadfastly masculine Baron de Raittolbe and the increasingly feminine Jacques cements this discursive convergence of gender and humanity. Raittolbe, troubled by Raoule’s monstrous romantic impropriety in taking up with Jacques, wishes to intervene in the situation using “son influence d’homme véritablement viril” (“his influence as a truly virile man”; 40; Hawthorne 114). Determined to engage in a frank man-to-man discussion with Jacques, the Baron instead finds himself surprisingly overcome by the latter’s feminine, ornamental beauty: Jacques’s head is “si blanc qu’il en avait des teintes de nacre” (“so white that it had pearly tints”; 40; Hawthorne 114), his sleeping body is encircled by satin, gold, diamonds, and roses, and upon waking, “il demeura superbe dans son impudeur de marbre antique” (“he remained superb in his shamelessness like an antique marble”; 41; Hawthorne 116). Raittolbe is confounded by Jacques’s willing relinquishment of masculinity, a trait he himself holds supreme. This willful unmanliness registers as degenerate, but also as marmoreal and bloodless—that is, inhuman. “Si vous aviez une goutte de sang dans les veines!...” (“If you had a drop of blood in your veins!...”; 41; Hawthorne 118), he growls at Jacques: blood would make Jacques a real man, while his

marbled, pearly flesh makes him revoltingly, dangerously feminine. For Raittolbe, this feminized man is despicable in his failure to conform to gender norms, but he holds an irresistible allure as an object to gaze upon and touch: Raittolbe “sentit la chair nacrée sous ses doigts” (“felt the pearly skin beneath his fingers”; 42; Hawthorne 119) as he beats Jacques senseless in a fit of displaced homosexual desire.

In descriptive passages like this one, the text moves beyond both metonymy and metaphor. Jacques is surrounded by objects and his body resembles objects—but remarkably, for Raoule and for the text, he also becomes one. On multiple occasions, he is described in a typically objectifying manner that renders his body vulnerable to a shamelessly inquisitive gaze. In one such voyeuristic passage, Raoule spies upon Jacques in the bath, undeterred by his protests.<sup>21</sup> Jacques’s body, on display in all its fleshly glory, is described in sensuous detail:

Clouée au sol, derrière le rideau, Mlle de Vénérande le voyait sans avoir besoin de se déranger. Les lueurs douces de la bougie tombaient mollement sur ses chairs blondes, toutes duvetées comme la peau d'une pêche. Il était tourné vers le fond du cabinet et jouait le principal rôle d'une des scènes de Voltaire, que raconte en détail une courtisane nommée Bouche-Vermeille.

Digne de la Vénus Callipyge, cette chute de reins où la ligne de l'épine dorsale fuyait dans un méplat voluptueux et se redressait, ferme, grasse, en deux contours adorables, avait l'aspect d'une sphère de Paros aux transparences d'ambre. (16)

Transfixed, behind the curtain, Mlle de Vénérande could see him without effort. The gentle glow of the candle fell softly on his fair skin, all velvety like a peach. He had his back turned, and he was acting the lead part in a scene by Voltaire, as told in detail by a courtesan called Ruby Lips.

Worthy of the Venus Callipyge, this curve of his back where his spine ended in a voluptuous plane and rose firm and plump in two adorable contours, looked like a Parian marble sphere with the transparency of amber. (Hawthorne 39-40)

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<sup>21</sup> In response to Raoule’s gaze, Jacques exclaims “Vous savez, *monsieur* de Vénérande... même entre hommes ce n'est pas convenable... Vous regardez!” (“You know, *Monsieur* de Vénérande... even between men that’s not proper... You’re peeking!”; 16; Hawthorne 38-39). Gantz calls this “an unprecedented moment of homosexual panic between a man and a woman” (123).



The passage continues at length to describe Raoule's observations of his thighs, calves, heels, arms, and body hair.

This scene could serve as a textbook example of the logic of domination at work in the male gaze, albeit with a genderbending twist: Jacques, exposed before the unwanted scrutiny of his patron "*Monsieur Vénérande*," is designated as object to be ogled by the text that narrates his body piece by piece. This reduction of a man to a "piece of meat" has the obvious effect of feminizing Jacques, but it also quite literally de-humanizes him, viewing him as other than human—as a peach, a fruit to be consumed, but more prominently as an artistic work. In his exquisiteness, Jacques is likened to a literary and visual masterpiece; he has the kind of beauty that must be invented by a master, constructed out of words (the scene by Voltaire) or marble (the Venus Callipyge, the Parian sphere). Like Pygmalion's Galatea, he attains marmoreal perfection as a statue that is nonetheless tinged with lively breath. His body is desired not so much as a human sex object as an actual, inanimate object, the product not of nature but of artistic vision and craftsmanship. He is, in other words, a Decadent cyborg, made up of organic flesh plus inhuman technology—not the "futuristic" machine technology of modernity, but the literary, visual, and aesthetic technologies of creation so privileged within Decadence.

But Jacques is not a self-authored work. Unlike Raoule, who fashions herself anew via the creative citation and discarding of existing social norms, her lover is the product, not the practitioner, of aesthetic genius. The artistic process functions here as a practice of domination and control. It is Raoule who acts as sculptor/poet/author, the hand fashioning Jacques's compliant splendor into a work of art. He serves as medium and tool as well as end product: he is "le bel instrument de plaisir qu'elle désirait" ("a beautiful instrument of pleasure that she coveted"; 10;

Hawthorne 19). She feeds him hashish in order to reconstruct his sensorium according to her whims: “Je viens te dépouiller de tes sens vulgaires pour t'en donner d'autres plus subtils, plus raffinés. Tu vas voir avec mes yeux, goûter avec mes lèvres” (“I’ve come to take away your vulgar senses and give you others more refined, more subtle. You’ll see with my eyes, taste with my lips”); 23; Hawthorne 61).

Even when he finally settles into a delighted acceptance of his passive, feminized state, the text tends to credit Raoule’s coercive control alongside, and intertwined with, Jacques’s own choice. In the ornate studio procured and decorated for him by Raoule, Jacques’s life is reduced to languidly waiting for Raoule’s return; he reads the books “que Raoule lui fournissait pour tenir ce cerveau naïf sous le charme” (“whatever Raoule furnished him to keep his primitive mind under her spell”) and indulges in “des habitudes dégradantes qu’elle lui donnait” (“the degrading habits she had taught him”); 33; Hawthorne 93). The more she treats him like a woman, the more he acts like a woman. The text emphasizes the compulsory nature of her feminizing, dehumanizing influence: “Elle forçait Jacques à se rouler dans son bonheur passif comme une perle dans sa nacre” (“She forced Jacques to bask in his passive happiness like a pearl in its shell”); 33; Hawthorne 94). Yet this metaphor also makes clear that he takes to the role: he can, indeed, bask in the luxuriously idle state into which he has been forced. His temperament is well-suited for this life of pretty passivity; so while Raoule writes the script, Jacques devotes himself to performing the part with gusto. He even finds ways to invest his own creative passions into the project of becoming passive, developing a flair for the art of femininity, “se jouant la comédie vis-à-vis lui-même, se prenant à être une femme pour le plaisir de l’art” (“playing out the game with himself, catching himself being a woman for the pleasure of art”); 34; Hawthorne

94): for instance, delicately arranging the enormous bouquets of white flowers that Raoule has delivered to him every morning.

This particular relationship between creator and object is not, however, a model of artistic detachment. Despite Raoule's characteristic coldness toward Jacques, the artist is not at all indifferent to her work; indeed, she is tormented by it, obsessed with it. For Raoule, artistic and sexual appeal are inextricably bound. What Jacques provokes in her is neither the dispassionate appreciation of a connoisseur for a fine work, nor the passion of a woman for her lover, but a particular kind of lust directed at an inhuman ornamental object. Such object-love has particular significance in the Decadent tradition. Gordon describes a redefinition of ornamentation in nineteenth-century French literature, mapping the shift from a notion of ornament as inessential accessory atop the real substance of something, to a notion of ornament as inseparable from essence. In that shift, certain boundaries are eroded—between substance and surface, reality and artifice, and indeed between human and object: if ornamentation is a constitutive part of a thing, even a thing in itself, it might overwhelm or replace the ornamented human as the object of desire. Ornament, then, functions as a kind of cyborg technology: it turns a human into a human-plus-ornament, a person-thing.<sup>22</sup> In setting up Jacques as both an ornamental object and a lover, the novel exemplifies the Decadent tendency that Gordon calls “a new model for desire: the body perceived as decorative object and as mute language of perversion” (234). The love between a human and an object challenges the notion of desire as properly belonging to and romantically linking persons.

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<sup>22</sup> Baudelaire, for instance, describes women as fundamentally technical assemblages, composed of an organic body plus the changeable accoutrements of fashion. I will return to this discussion of cyborg ornamentation in Chapter 2.

The clearest testimony to such object-oriented devotion occurs in the novel's shocking final chapter. Jacques's death does not make him any less suitable as a love (or sex) object for Raoule. His corpse becomes the medium for her final perverse tableau:

Sur la couche en forme de conque, gardée par un Eros de marbre, repose un mannequin de cire revêtu d'un épiderme en caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux, les cils blonds, le duvet d'or de la poitrine sont naturels; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre. Les yeux en émail ont un adorable regard. (72)

On the bed shaped like a seashell, guarded by an Eros of marble, rests a wax figure covered with transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that ornament the mouth, the nails on the hands and feet were torn from a corpse. The enameled eyes have an adorable look. (Hawthorne 208)

This mannequin is equipped with a set of springs that animates its mouth (and, in the first edition of the text, mechanically spreads its thighs) in response to the embraces of its twilight visitor, "une femme vêtue de deuil, quelquefois un jeune homme en habit noir" ("a woman dressed in mourning, sometimes a young man in evening clothes"; 72; Hawthorne 209).

The culmination of all the novel's deliberate provocations, the final chapter's scandals include Raoule's total renunciation of bourgeois society, her cross-dressing, her necrophilia and fetishism, and the not-quite-defined (but definitely improper) sex act suggested in the embrace. The encounter between the two bodies is multiply queer; the obvious conundrum is that one is alive and one dead, but there remains the matter of what, exactly, is taking place between them. The line describing the mannequin's spread thighs, present in the original 1884 publication but removed from all subsequent editions, comes closest to clarifying the logistics of Raoule and Jacques's sex life by suggesting that she (as either man or woman) penetrates the wax effigy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Monsieur Vénus* has a long and complicated publication history. It was originally published in Belgium to avoid France's restrictive publishing laws (or perhaps just to create a mythology of scandal), then quickly banned as pornography in Belgium and reissued, slightly modified, in France in 1889. For more detail, see Sanchez, as well as Hawthorne's chapter "1884, May-July: The Politics of Publishing."

But perhaps the biggest scandal of this finale is even queerer and harder to define: the troubling sense of continuity between Jacques as living and dead *objet d'art*. For was he not always, in some sense, her mannequin, her artful assemblage of male and female, biology and technology, human and nonhuman? Raoule's final art project continues the tradition of all her dealings with Jacques. For her, he was always a collage of organic and inanimate, a living work-in-progress. For the text, his body is best understood in inanimate terms, as poem, sculpture, or painting. It seems only fitting, then, that in death he continues to occupy the role of the cyborg *objet d'art*—a “chef d'oeuvre d'anatomie” (“anatomical masterpiece”; 72; Hawthorne 210), a mixed media project of organic and inanimate parts. The process of objectification can go no further; the love object has been literally “killed into art” (Gilbert and Gubar 17).<sup>24</sup>

## Authoring the idol

Despite its extreme conclusion, the relationship between Raoule and Jacques does not abide by a fixed structure of domination and submission; their power play is characterized by dizzying ambivalence. In the midst of Raoule's extreme objectification of Jacques, she herself is the one overpowered. Early in their courtship, as she spies on him in the bath, her confident sense of possession erupts into a paroxysm of bewildered doubt. Even as she fixes her objectifying gaze upon him, she feels mastered by the object she desires: “Je l'ai acheté, je lui appartiens. C'est moi qui suis vendue” (“I bought him; I belong to him. It is I who am sold”; 17; Hawthorne

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<sup>24</sup> “Killing into art” comes from the classic work of feminist literary criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The phrase describes the nineteenth-century masculine aesthetic tradition that pens (in the dual sense of authorship and imprisonment) the feminine into restrictive tropes such as the angel and the monster. Gilbert and Gubar call for women writers to “kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (17), a critique that will resurface in Chapter 3. Here Rachilde takes the notion of representational “killing” to its literal extreme.

41). This power exchange is more complicated than a mere switch of positions—dominant to submissive and vice versa. Instead, it is as though domination is evacuated of its force, overcome by the unfamiliar power issuing forth from passive submission. Raoule’s mastery is ambivalent, not total, vulnerable to the powerful nonpower of her abject lover, the one she calls, repeatedly and significantly, her idol. The figure of the idol complicates the notion of Raoule as author and Jacques as work.<sup>25</sup> An idol is a material object, crafted by human hands for human purposes; but for the idolator, the inanimate thing also wields divine power. It contains more than what the human artist puts into it; it is a created work that exceeds and overwhelms its creator, who builds it not as master, but as humble worshipper. The idol thus incorporates and intertwines two types of nonhumanity: the “subhuman” qualities of an object, and the “superhuman” qualities of a god.<sup>26</sup>

So it is a special kind of artistry that Raoule is engaged in with (or upon) Jacques. On the one hand, she dominates him, turning his personality and his body into raw material to be molded into her private masterpiece. On the other hand, the work she creates commands her, at times, with its own immanent divinity. Paradoxically, the more Jacques submits to Raoule’s rule, the more he becomes an object of her worship. At one point, feeling self-conscious about the bizarre gender inversion of their relationship, Raoule offers Jacques a chance to become her husband and legitimate their relationship through heterosexual marriage. For a moment, she reverts to the hated discourse of conventional romance as masculine conquest: “Notre amour

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<sup>25</sup> Conveniently, the French *une idole* is a feminine-gendered noun. Calling Jacques *l’idole* is thus another way to make him, grammatically at least, an *elle*, a she.

<sup>26</sup> In the Bible, God condemns idolatry in a move that Barbara Johnson interprets as the elimination of divine competition. From this point of view, idols are a material threat to monotheism, rather than a display of disbelief. “Therefore,” she deduces, “the possibility of coming alive must be very present in a statue; and its divinity uncannily near” (136).

n'est qu'une dégradante torture que tu subis parce que je te paye. Eh bien, je te rends ta liberté. J'espère que tu sauras en user pour me reconquérir... si tu m'aimes" ("Our love is only a degrading torture that you submit to because I pay you. Well, I give you back your freedom. I hope that you'll manage to use it to win me all over again... if you love me"; 39; Hawthorne 111). Here Raoule proffers herself as a womanly object waiting to be won, calling upon Jacques to pursue her actively in the mode of a free male subject.

When offered the choice, however, Jacques emphatically rejects this return to propriety. He chooses to remain her wife, not her husband: "je serai encore votre esclave, celui que vous appelez: ma femme!" ("I'll still be your slave, the one you call my wife!"; 39; Hawthorne 111). Yet Jacques's total relinquishment of power is inextricable from the divine power he commands as idol. Rapt with pleasure at his submission, Raoule renews her own idolatrous veneration: "De nouveau, les souvenirs grecs entouraient l'idole d'un nuage d'encens. A présent on l'aimait pour l'amour du vice; Jacques devenait dieu" ("Once again, Greek images were surrounding her idol in a cloud of incense. Now it was love for the love of vice: Jacques was becoming God"; 40; Hawthorne 112-113). Hers is a heathen kind of worship, fixated on the spectacular materiality of her idol. Rather than representing or channeling a transcendent higher power, her idol is divine in its very object-being: Jacques is, paradoxically, divinely potent in his abjection.<sup>27</sup>

The problem with an idol (at least in Raoule's theology) is that it can be irrevocably

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<sup>27</sup> This worship of the object's materiality distances it somewhat from the traditional concept of idolatry, understood as a heretical order of faith in contrast to Christianity. As William Pietz explains, the concept of the fetish emerges in contrast to the idol in medieval and Enlightenment European discourse based on the former object's irreducible materiality and the latter's function as iconic representation of an immaterial entity (7). The concept of the fetish takes shape in the colonial and mercantile exchanges between Europe and the West African coast after the fifteenth century (16). The defining emphasis on untranscended materiality inheres in the way the term is deployed in Marxism and Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Though it is beyond the present scope of this chapter, further work on *Monsieur Vénus* calls for a more precise articulation of Jacques as a sexual, spiritual, and economic fetish object in the context of *fin-de-siècle* France.

tarnished, even desacralized, by improper worship. Although the idol musters a divine force as part of its material being, it is finally “just an object,” vulnerable to destruction by mortal hands. Thus when Raoule orchestrates her lover’s death in response to what she sees as his ultimate betrayal, she uses the language of idolatry to justify her actions. After the two have settled into an improper marriage (in contrast to the “normal” marriage Raoule had earlier proposed), Jacques begins experimenting with his sexuality, which in his case, ironically, means trying out more conventional amorous patterns. He first attempts to “tromper sa femme” (“betray his wife”; 67; Hawthorne 193), but, humiliatingly, finds himself unable to be aroused by any of the women at his sister’s brothel. Raoule quickly forgives this banal attempt at transgression: in their relationship, it is basically impossible for Jacques to cheat on his wife with another woman, since Raoule does not fully consider herself either a “woman” or a “wife.” By making him love her peculiarly-gendered self, she has destroyed his capacity for heterosexual desire; as Jacques cries angrily, “pas une de ces filles... n'a pu faire revivre ce que tu as tué, sacrilège!” (“not one of those girls... was able to revive what you’ve killed, you desecrator!”; 66; Hawthorne 193). The real problem arises when he tries to “trahir son amant” (“betray his lover”; 67; Hawthorne 193)—to cheat on Raoule, his masculine lover, with a man.<sup>28</sup>

It is the hyper-masculine Baron de Raittolbe who catches Jacques’s fancy. The two

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<sup>28</sup> The question of why Jacques wants to betray Raoule (whether hetero- or homosexually) is not precisely answered by the text. His ineffectual visit to the brothel appears to be motivated by social pressures to conform to “normal” masculinity, rather than authentic desire; indeed, Jacques goes to the brothel only upon Raittolbe’s suggestion. But Jacques’s attempted seduction of Raittolbe is more complicated. It might demonstrate that, as Raoule bemoans, “la chair saine et fraîche est la souveraine du monde” (“fresh and healthy flesh rules the world”; 67; Hawthorne 194). Unlike Raoule, who seems single-minded in her devotion, Jacques might simply want to exercise his seductive passivity non-monogamously. Another possibility: his transgression might signify as a form of resistance against Raoule and the passive role she has crafted for him—although his chosen target Raittolbe, who repeatedly threatens to kill Jacques for provoking homosexual desire, does not offer an empowering alternative. Finally, there is what seems to be Raoule’s own interpretation: seducing Raittolbe reveals Jacques’s attachment to conventions of gender identity and desire. She wants him to be singular, a genderqueer “Raoule-sexual”; he threatens to become merely a type, a feminine male homosexual.



men experience a mutually uncomfortable attraction from the moment of their first encounter, a spark that does not escape Raoule's notice: after that meeting, she roars "*je suis jaloux!*" ("I am *a jealous man!*"; 30; Hawthorne 83) at Jacques, forbidding him to see, speak to or touch any man without her permission. Once again, she demonstrates her investment in the creative singularity of their partnership. Their love is, as the passage that opens this chapter declares, "un unique monstre" with uniquely monstrous genders and sexualities: she has engineered him to be a woman (with a difference) who desires her as a man (with a difference) in a relationship that is neither precisely homosexual nor heterosexual. Jacques's unforgivable betrayal is therefore to generalize his desire, to shift from desiring Raoule's specific brand of genderqueer masculinity to desiring masculinity in general. To do so amounts to pitting her against other men—that is, assigned-male-at-birth, legally and socially recognized men—in a contest of masculinity where she will always come up short.

Sensitive to this threat against her carefully wrought queer masculinity, Raoule immediately understands the gay subtext of Raittolbe's attack on Jacques—and is forced to confront the possibility that her idol might command more than one devout heart. "Vous avez de trop près vu mon idole que je puisse vous pardonner" ("you've seen my idol too close up for me to be able to forgive you"; 50; Hawthorne 143), she accuses Raittolbe, angry not because of the wounds he inflicted on her lover but because of the intimacy of that violent encounter. When she imagines Jacques's betrayal, her reaction is severe: "Je ne le châtierai pas, je me contenterai de détruire l'idole, car on ne peut plus adorer un dieu déchu!" ("I won't chastise him! I'll be content to destroy the idol, because one can no longer worship a fallen god!"; 67; Hawthorne 195). Later, after Jacques, dressed in drag (and passing as "Madame Silvert"), secretly goes to

Raittolbe's apartment to attempt seduction, Raoule makes good on her plan. She contrives an elaborate switch: dressed as a man and carrying her husband's card, she announces herself to the valet as "Monsieur Silvert" and charges in on Raittolbe, who, anguished by his repressed desire for Jacques, is on the brink of shooting himself. Behind closed doors, Jacques and Raoule switch clothes; now it is Jacques who plays the part of "Monsieur Silvert," the husband who just caught his wife *in flagrante delicto* and must now challenge the Baron to a gentleman's duel.

This complicated business could all pass as another of Raoule and Jacques's genderqueer role-playing games. Emily Apter observes that the switching scene precludes any determination of correct and incorrect presentation for these two eccentrically-gendered beings. Their final costumes—Raoule in women's clothing, Jacques in men's—constitute "double drag," rather than drag's absence; "[Raoule's] role as 'wife' is far more of a masquerade than her cross-dressed persona as 'husband' of a feminized man" (Apter 260). But this drag is no playacting. Its deadly serious stakes exemplify a tradition Apter locates in Rachilde's oeuvre: the militarization of cross-dressing in the "battle of the sexes" (259).<sup>29</sup> Unbeknownst to Jacques, Raoule has commanded Raittolbe to duel to the death. Since Jacques can barely handle a sword, his demise is inevitable; he dies in the distraught Baron's arms, declaring his love for Raoule as she looks on silently.

Raoule, it seems, thus successfully "destroys the idol" that has been tainted by the desiring touch of another, one whose purportedly "natural" masculinity threatens to supplant her own extensively cultivated genderqueer masculinity. The idol, stripped of its divine power,

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<sup>29</sup> Apter proposes that Rachilde's early career as a fashion columnist helps explain the detailed, knowledgeable descriptions of clothing throughout her novels, often supporting the theme of "fashion mobilized as a tool of combat" (261). Rachilde's spectacularly-dressed women, Apter argues, use *femme fatale* fashion as a weapon in their ongoing war against oppressive men.

becomes merely a corpse; the corpse becomes fodder for a mixed-media necrophiliac fetish object. Jacques's murder, it seems, violently snuffs out whatever agency or power he possessed as a living object. And yet, what if this novel's disturbing finale represents the reconstruction, not destruction, of the idol? If we take the novel on its own terms, there is an ontological continuity, not a break, between Jacques as a living object and as a dead, reassembled one. He is a man who submits to becoming a woman-thing, an entity constituted of both humanity and nonhumanity, agency and passivity, volition and subservience. Might he continue to exert that passive cyborg agency, even after death?

The novel asks us to consider that frustrating possibility—to identify a kind of power, force or desire that is mustered from the site of extreme abjection; to consider Jacques as something other than a victim. In this light, the trysts between Raoule and her Jacques-mannequin in the final chapter could indeed be seen as the latest development of their elaborate lovers' role-playing games, in which attributions of gender and humanity/nonhumanity are in constant flux. The living woman's attachment to her lover's creatively reconstructed corpse combines a necrophiliac belief in the agency of the dead and a fetishistic belief in the agency of the inanimate object of fixation; the novel suggests that these beliefs are not pathological illusions, but profound recognitions of a difficult truth. The mannequin, understood as idol rather than effigy, preserves its nonhuman power, its combination of superhuman divinity and subhuman inertia. Raoule's final work is therefore more than what she put into it: not a transcendent vessel for Jacques's spirit, but the still-lively material of his cyborg body.

## **The agency of the object**

The relationship between Raoule and Jacques thus presents a peculiar alternative to romantic, heterosexual, interpersonal coupling. For romance, it substitutes an artist's passionate and tempestuous devotion to her work; for heterosexuality, it substitutes the queer pairing of a female Monsieur and a male Madame; and for interpersonal love, it substitutes an intimate affair between a human and an object. In this iteration of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth, the work of the artist is to fashion a thing out of person; the divine spark that animates Galatea in answer to Pygmalion's prayers is here reimagined as a fatal blow. Both Ovid's myth and Rachilde's strange retelling could be interpreted as stories of total, irreversible shift: from one category to its opposite, from nonliving to living or vice versa. Yet both, in fact, suggest that metamorphosis is a fluid spectrum, not a quantum leap. Galatea and Jacques each manifest a kind of lively agency even from their state of supposedly dead inanimacy—the former before her transition, the latter after his. Pygmalion loves his artwork so much that he begs for its divine animation as a human woman. In contrast, Raoule is devoted to her artwork both as object and as human, without making much distinction between the two states. Her beloved Jacques has marble skin, teeth of pearls, and a poem for a body; even while living, he flouts the rigid boundary supposed to separate person from thing. Between this artist and her work, there exists a cyborg love, a queer and complex tangle of masculine and feminine, human and nonhuman, living and inanimate.

But a slew of problematic questions cluster around this novel, branching out around the entire Rachilde oeuvre. Is Raoule's genderbending objectification of her lover reactionary or radical? Does she exploit violent structures of masculine, misogynist power, or does she contest

them? Is *Monsieur Vénus* the story of a flamboyant gender reversal that leaves the gendered opposition of subject/object intact, or a subversion of that hierarchical binary? The perverse Rachildean answer to these questions would have to be “yes.” There is no easy way to make Raoule a feminist, queer, or posthumanist champion. On the contrary, her actions are wholly contemptible: she snatches a lover from poverty, degrades and humiliates him, orchestrates his death and desecrates his corpse. One might see her work on Jacques as the perfect fulfillment of patriarchal fantasy, the ultimate objectification of the feminine and nonhuman body.

This reading, however, would miss the novel’s difficult, yet potentially radical nuances that challenge the rigid power structures of the subject/object binary. It would overlook, for instance, Jacques’s participation in his own objectification, his complicity with the cruel whims of his Monsieur. It would deny the force of his masochism as a counterpart to Raoule’s sadism. Consent and coercion are not easily distinguished in this relationship: Raoule exploits Jacques’s low economic and social status to bind him to her and uses violence to set the terms of their relationship. Yet in some sense, Jacques participates in his own dehumanization; he submits himself as her object, mistress, and thing. As figure of absolute passivity, he nevertheless demonstrates a strange form of activity, of letting himself be acted upon. Sadomasochism, because it theorizes the pleasures of receiving as well as inflicting pain, is a useful framework for understanding their relationship; but, conceived as a sexual practice between humans, sadomasochism does not go far enough to explain the border-crossing exploits of Raoule and Jacques. If Raoule acts out her inhuman desire to transform a human into an object, then Jacques, in turn, acts out his inhuman desire to become an object—to be feminized, animalized, and objectified beyond the very limits of the human.

The posthumanism intimated by this novel thus builds upon the Decadent penchant for simulation, artifice, and ornamentation in order to consider the strange liveliness of that which is designated object. This Decadent posthumanism identifies the artistic process as a site of interface between human and nonhuman, between living creator and inanimate creation, where more than one form of agency is in play. It challenges conventions of authorship and artistry to explore the power that a work—traditionally a feminized inhuman object—might exert over its creator—traditionally a masculine human subject. To do so, it repeatedly invokes discourses of hysteria—that ancient disease of femininity that is mobilized with particular force at the *fin de siècle* as an aesthetic, political, and cultural category. The notion of hysterical authorship intervenes in the masculine fantasy of the female *objet d'art* and in Raoule's fantasy of total mastery over a living or dead Jacques. Hysteria provides a key to the theorization of Jacques's strange agency, of the kind of force that might manifest from a place of total nonpower.

### **Reading hysteria in *Monsieur Vénus***

Tracing the significance of hysteria for nineteenth-century writing, Janet Beizer writes that the history of hysteria can only be considered “a fiction,” for there has never been a moment in the disease's long history “when hysteria existed as an entity outside a web of contexts (misogyny, pathology, death, religion, and the supernatural, among others)” (3). Hysteria is a discursive condition, she argues, never simply a medical one. For nearly four millennia, hysteria, defined most consistently as a malady of the uterus, puts a name to a pathological state of femininity (associated with sexuality and mobility, as in the ancient Greek representation of the “wandering

womb”). A diagnosis available for any woman considered deviant, uncontrollable, emotional, or excessive, hysteria reifies a notion of femininity as constantly on the verge of disorder.<sup>30</sup> In Beizer’s account, a new understanding and practice of hysteria emerges in the nineteenth century, due in no small part to extensive research conducted by neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris.<sup>31</sup> A phenomenon she calls the “hystericization of culture” appropriates the medical concept of hysteria as a broadly accessible cultural category: “Figure of femininity, label of disorder and difference, hysteria was available for a wide and often contradictory range of aesthetic and political purposes” (8).

In particular, Beizer argues, hysteria becomes locked into a mutually constitutive relationship with nineteenth-century textuality. On the one hand, hysteria becomes a favored narrative trope (with Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary* as its prototype); on the other, hysteria discourse obsesses over processes of speech, reading, and writing, drawing muddled connections between women’s use of text and language and their feminine disease. Virtually every nineteenth-century medical text on hysteria recommends female illiteracy as a preventative measure; the disease provides a convenient reason, backed by the authority of medical experts, to oppose feminist calls for women’s increased access to education (Beizer 55-56). At the same time, the body of the hysteric is constructed as a text, a blank slate available for the inscription of various medical and

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<sup>30</sup> Men, too, were diagnosed with hysteria throughout this history, and about twenty to twenty-five percent of Charcot’s patients were male. However, as Jan Goldstein asserts, the discourse around male hysterics in that era tends to reaffirm rather than subvert the patriarchal status quo. In some cases, male hysterics are identified by their “effeminacy” (that is, failure to conform to masculine norms); in other cases, different forms of “otherness” displace feminine deviance as the primary symptom. Female hysterics are diagnosed across the social spectrum, but Charcot’s male patients are largely either working-class/unemployed or Jewish/Arab. “From the vantage point of the male, bourgeois, Christian doctor who made the diagnosis, the male hysteric remained the ‘other,’ as radically foreign and as extruded from the self as the female hysteric” (154).

<sup>31</sup> Charcot’s extremely influential work helps turn hysteria into a popular medical/cultural phenomenon. He achieves fame as a “scientific showman” (Beizer 8 n.15) for his lecture-demonstrations, during which he exhibits patients and puts them under hypnosis to reveal their symptoms to a rapt crowd. Beizer makes clear, however, that Charcot’s work constitutes a continuation, rather than a break, with the long tradition of hysteria discourse.

literary discourses. She becomes both medium and product of male authorship, forced to become a body that “does not speak; it is spoken, ventriloquized by the master text that makes it signify” (Beizer 26).<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, as Asti Hustvedt argues, “while hysteria was the most disturbing of female diseases, it was also potentially the ideal female condition, precisely because it could, through the proper techniques, erase woman’s inherent degenerative and pathological biology and turn her into a surface for inscription” (42).

The cultural context of *Monsieur Vénus* is thus a society wrestling with the vexing relationships among femininity, sexuality, textuality, and pathology. Hysteria discourse overdetermines the novel on two levels: Rachilde, the young woman writing a shockingly pornographic work, is vulnerable to the diagnosis, and so is her depraved, nervous antiheroine Raoule. Predictably, neither novelist nor character fit neatly into the diagnostic category of the hysteric; both draw ambivalently upon the clichés and tropes of contemporary hysteria discourse in a manner that neither reliably upholds nor contests its misogynist foundations. The politically indeterminate Rachilde, Beizer emphasizes, leaves it an open question whether her “relentless repetition of the social discourse of her time is not a sign of resistance but of compliance” (235); the text’s operating principle is an always-ambivalent “and/or.”

One possible feminist reading of this novel would therefore be to highlight how it undermines hysteria discourse, citing its clichés overzealously and ironically in order to contest its oppressive fatalism with regard to unconventional women; this approach has been ably undertaken by Beizer and other critics. Building upon that important work, I choose to ask instead what hysteria might offer to a feminist posthumanist reading, how it might function as

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<sup>32</sup> Literally, in the horrifying phenomenon of dermatographism, in which doctors exploit the “impressionable” skin of a hysterical patient in order to use her body as a writing-pad (Beizer 20-29).



more than a patriarchal specter to be deconstructed away. Hysteria, I argue, provides a culturally legible explanation for how a human might become a nonhuman, animalized, irrational thing, and might thus act using something other than the normal mechanisms of human agency.<sup>33</sup> Hysteria asserts that the disordered body speaks by being spoken, suggesting an ambivalent, embodied, non-normative form of voice. That is, hysteria discourse does positive work as well as negative: it productively identifies an alternative to rational, autonomous, human subjectivity, even as it destructively pathologizes that alternative, using the diagnosis of hysteria to further oppress members of society who are already socially, economically, and politically powerless.

Self-consciously trapped in that bind, *Monsieur Vénus* draws upon hysteria's ambivalent force both to facilitate and to contest the possibility of genuine feminine authorship. Here, authorship signifies beyond the literal act of writing a book. "Author" is not a neutral category of occupation. In the context of Rachilde and Raoule, an author is an "homme de lettres," a man authorized to write books, to write himself, to write the world. Authorship is what is proper to the fully autonomous, masculine, human subject; by definition, it is that to which no woman (nor animal, nor object) has access. Both Rachilde and Raoule appropriate the masculine power of authorship, but also grapple with the presumed feminine impotence that renders women into mediums or texts, not authors. The result is a kind of "hysterical authorship" on two levels, one within the diegesis and one metatextual. In this double ambivalence, hysteria discourse might provide the key to its own undoing, suggesting a way out of its seemingly rigid

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<sup>33</sup> This chapter focuses on how hysteria facilitates the recognition of the thingness of persons, but the disease's insistence on the animality of persons is equally promising for a feminist posthumanist theory of subjectivity. In their bestial refusal to follow the rules of civilized speech, behavior, and embodiment, hysterical patients are positioned by mainstream discourse as more animal than human. Reading that state as productive and valuable rather than pathological is one way to critique anthropocentric hierarchies of species-linked behavior.

structures of power and nonpower. The diagnosis of hysteria provides a scientifically legitimized means of subjugating women by aligning them with the subordinate elements of a series of hierarchical binaries: the opposition hysteric/rational echoes that of body/mind, animal/human, instinct/intellect, and of course, female/male. But the bald misogyny that discursively links women with nonhumans (animals and objects) in order to pathologize them provides the basis for the liberation of both women and nonhumans. For to recuperate femininity, within this patriarchal framework, is also to recuperate animality and objecthood. Jacques, the feminized nonhuman object, serves as a figure of all that is cast off and degraded by masculine human subjecthood. In the difficult theorization of his passive agency, it is this triple liberation—of femininity, animality, and objecthood—that is at stake.

## **Rachilde as hysterical author**

*Monsieur Vénus* appears in 1884, when its author (*née* Marguerite Eymery) is 24 years old and living in Paris. She had already published several short stories, but the novel catapults her headlong into fame and launches her career as one of only a handful of female writers in the avant-garde literary communities of the *fin de siècle*. The notoriety of *Monsieur Vénus*, a pornographic work by a virginal young woman, leads to lucrative book sales, as well as to a complicated metatextual discourse surrounding the novel and its author. Rachilde provides several contradictory stories throughout her life about her beginnings as a writer, alternately emphasizing personal experience, mental illness, the supernatural, and economic necessity as possible explanations for the genesis of *Monsieur Vénus*. But as biographer Melanie Hawthorne

cautions, and any scholar trying to pin down specifics of Rachilde's life and work would probably agree, "in reading Rachilde, one should not fail to consider the paramount importance of narrative, of what makes a good story" (*Rachilde* 15), and any reading must take a highly skeptical position toward what the writer claims as truth. It is important to remember that Rachilde is not Raoule; to equate them would be to participate in the critical strategy of de-authorization that identifies a woman isometrically with her text (demonstrated in Maurice Barrès's preface to the novel, discussed below). Yet Raoule's lesson about identity—that it is an intricately constructed mash-up of available discourses, subject to change and contradiction—seems crucial to any investigation of Rachilde herself, whose biography serves as not only context but also intertext for *Monsieur Vénus*.

In an important sense, Rachilde herself is an entirely fictional character. More than a *nom de plume*, "Rachilde" contains a tangled knot of contemporary discourses of gender, authorship, and pathology; "Rachilde" both enables and inhibits the writing career of Marguerite Eymery, who publishes nothing under her own name but writes prolifically and successfully for nearly seven decades. The persona emerges in 1876, when sixteen-year-old Marguerite is still living at home with her family. Spiritualism being all the rage in bourgeois circles of the time, her grandparents frequently stage séances at the Eymery estate in southwestern France. One day, the young aspiring writer claims to be possessed by a Swedish nobleman named Rachilde; the girl and the spirit develop a working relationship in which he dictates stories to her and she writes them down. In Marguerite's current cultural and familial context, "to be chosen as the vehicle for such a noble and distinguished voice was an honor that a girl could hardly be expected to refuse" (Hawthorne *Rachilde* 69). Thus the act of writing is made accessible to a young woman:

she might properly serve as medium for a male author, though it remains improper for her to write in her own voice.

In later memoirs, Rachilde admits that the story of spiritual possession was only a ruse to trick her parents into letting her write. A skeptical reader, however, might wonder about the extent of this repudiation. If the persona of Rachilde was merely a lie, an excuse for a young writer to defy the conventions of her day, then why does she become so attached to it and continue to use it until her death? “Rachilde” is a strategic professional decision for a particular cultural moment; but, once she achieves literary fame, the *nom de plume* and its spiritual justification of the woman writer is no longer strictly necessary. Hawthorne suggests that one reason Rachilde continues to use the name is because its gender ambiguity suits her own eccentric relation to gender norms: “Rachilde” is a man’s name, but feminized by its final -e.<sup>34</sup> The pseudonym thus begins as a disguise, providing “the kind of protective gender shield sought by many women writers of the nineteenth century who wanted to place their work in the public sphere without incurring immediate condemnation” (Hawthorne *Rachilde* 70). But Rachilde’s name, combined with her tendency to wear men’s clothing in public and the calling card that identifies her as “homme de lettres,” a man of letters (Hawthorne *Rachilde* 109), eventually becomes a way for her to openly declare herself as a woman who appropriates freely from the domain of masculinity. These masculine accoutrements signal not a disguise, but an ironic, flexible, and deliberately scandalous approach to gender.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The name of the character Raoule evokes the same gender complexity, feminizing the relatively common masculine name Raoul by its final -e.

<sup>35</sup> Cross-dressing was illegal in nineteenth-century France, but occasional exemptions were granted. Rachilde was one of the few who applied for and obtained an official “*permis de travestissement*” that allowed her to wear men’s clothing in public. Hawthorne’s chapter “1884, December 12: Writing as Cross-Dressing” puts this often-repeated biographical tidbit into a fuller context. Rachilde’s cross-dressing signifies not a simple self-presentation as a man, but the more confounding and ongoing “question of how to tell when she is *not* cross-dressing” (*Rachilde* 113).

But along with (and related to) its connotation of gender ambiguity, the long-standing fiction of “Rachilde” might serve Rachilde as a useful complication of her own status as author or “homme de letters.” It poses an ambivalent intervention into a cultural discourse that identifies authorship with the rigorous exercise of the autonomous male intellect. Rachilde, the successful female author, is willing to share the credit (whether ironically or sincerely) for her work; it is not born from her mind alone, she claims, but is multiply and mystically authored.<sup>36</sup> With the notion of spiritual possession, she seems both to employ and to mock the notion of woman as an empty vessel, a blank medium for male inscription. On the one hand, the Rachilde story might imply that a woman cannot be an author without male assistance, or (worse) can never be more than the scribe for a male voice. On the other hand, it might also assert that an author, even one recognized as legitimate, is nonetheless also a scribe, subject to multiple discourses, influences, and voices that speak through her and contribute to her work. Authorial intent is not the only force in play; Rachilde’s writing draws upon a mixture of woman and man, living and dead, materiality and spirituality, agency and passivity. Her spirit partner ostensibly serves as a link to legitimate, male, human authorship: unlike the woman who uses his name, Rachilde the Swedish nobleman would be a perfectly socially acceptable author, were he not dead. But the spirit also functions in a nonhuman capacity, as a technology of authorship that allows feminine writing to appear where it has been forbidden. As a hysterical medium, Rachilde is thus a kind of cyborg author: not just human, but human-with-spirit.

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<sup>36</sup> The authorship of *Monsieur Vénus* is complicated even further by its original presentation as a collaboration between Rachilde and Francis Talman. Whether Talman actually existed or was another of Rachilde’s authorial inventions is unclear. In Rachilde’s own account, Talman offered his co-authorship and his fencing skills to defend Rachilde’s reputation and fight any duels precipitated by the novel’s publication. His name and the passages he supposedly authored were removed from subsequent editions. (Sanchez 253, Hawthorne *Rachilde* 88).

In the context of nineteenth-century France, these questions of spiritual possession, authorship, and female textuality are inseparable from medical and cultural discourses of hysteria. Given Rachilde's status as a young unmarried woman, her origin story of mystical authorship, and the shocking nature of her novel, the public finds plenty of reasons to label her hysterical, a diagnosis that might work to her own benefit at the same time that it constrains her and denies her agency. A young virgin in the thralls of spiritual possession, unable to resist the forces channeling dirty stories through her helpless body—this image, playing off cultural obsessions, is extremely marketable in Rachilde's Paris. But what a "hysterical author" (or, more accurately, a "writing hysteric") gains in book sales, she loses in authorial legitimacy. Her work becomes the product of a disease, not an author; her body becomes a medium and her creative mind is completely effaced from the writing process.

To understand the importance of hysterical authorship to Rachilde's public persona, we need look no further than the preface to the 1889 edition of *Monsieur Venus*, which Beizer suggests can be read as "an index of conventions or norms of reading in the larger public" (229). Written by Maurice Barrès, a contemporary writer and politician, the preface reflects the ambivalence of its author's rocky personal relationship with Rachilde; it is both a glowing review and a condescending dismissal of the very possibility of female authorship. That is, according to Barrès, this brilliant novel is penned not by an author, but by an impressionable scribe. It is not a product of artistic creation, but an involuntary outpouring of feverish femininity—a symptom rather than a literary work.

The preface engages multiple strategies of de-authorization that are unabashedly contradictory. Barrès overemphasizes Rachilde's youth, calling her "une enfant," "une vierge," "une

mineure,” “la petite fille” (“a child,” “a virgin,” “a minor,” “the little girl”; 4) and claiming that she wrote the novel at 20 (she was 24 when it was published). Asserting his friend’s lack of worldly and sexual experience, he patronizingly interprets the sexual ambiguity of the novel as a result of “l’ignorance d’une vierge qui se mêlait, je crois, de ce qu’elle n’avait pas regardé” (“the ignorance of a virgin who gets mixed up, I believe, in things she has never seen”; 4). At the same time, he claims that her stories are autobiographical in nature and thus require no creative effort, declaring that “Rachilde n’a guère fait que se raconter soi-même” (“Rachilde has hardly done anything but recount herself”; 4). Women’s writing, it seems, is merely a masturbatory exercise: “Elle écrit des pages sincères, uniquement pour exciter et aviver ses frissons” (“She writes sincere pages, only to excite and arouse her frissons”; 5).

Barrès’s de-authorizing strategy ascribes Rachilde’s writing to a receptive body rather than an inventive mind. “Certes, la petite fille qui rédigeait ce merveilleux Monsieur Vénus n’avait pas toute cette esthétique dans la tête” (“Certainly, the little girl who drafted this marvelous Monsieur Venus did not have all this aesthetic in her head”; 4), he writes knowingly. In fact, his friend’s age and gender disqualify her from the ranks of the human, and thus from the possibility of intelligent action. “Les jeunes filles... sont gouvernées uniquement par l’instinct, étant de petits animaux sournois” (“young girls... are uniquely governed by instinct, being shifty little animals”; 4); to write a book, this feminine animal need not think, only react. Her novel is thus a testimony to its particular social context, a symptom of “la maladie du siècle,” the widespread state of nervous ennui that characterizes the end of the century in the cultural imagination. It is “authored” by forces that inhabit the young woman but do not belong to her: the mystical, uncontrollable forces of pathological femininity. Rachilde is cast as the unwitting medium of

her book, the blank page upon which a troubling and confusing cultural malady is inscribed. Feminine, irrational, diseased, and inhuman, she is in every way the other, both threatening and titillating, to Barrès's presumed critical masculine reading public.

The bald misogyny of such claims is evident; it is more difficult to surmise Rachilde's own relationship to the oppressive patriarchal narratives that frame her career. Hawthorne emphasizes Rachilde's agency in the game of portraying herself as a hysterical non-agent, since her savvy performance of cultural stereotypes makes good business sense. But perhaps more than economics is at stake. Rachilde seems to suggest for herself—or allow to be suggested for her—an alternative notion of authorship, one that incorporates a mix of agential forces beyond the authorial self. The young woman can be understood as both author and text, person and thing, active and passive: a hysterical cyborg, not a fully autonomous human being. Hysterical authorship, in the sense Barrès suggests, is a non-authorship. But the complicated, multiply-authored text that is “Rachilde” suggests a recuperation of hysterical authorship as a legitimate possibility, perhaps even the only possibility. To be an authorial agent might paradoxically require a certain passivity, a receptiveness toward whatever creative forces might come to possess you. Thus the artist is also a medium; the writing subject is also a written object; the masculine “homme de lettres” is also a feminine “page blanche.”

### **Raoule as hysterical author**

The hysterical metanarrative is echoed within the narrative of *Monsieur Vénus*, which, in the disease-obsessed tradition of Decadent writing, draws heavily upon hysteria discourse



to construct an explanatory framework for its bizarre heroine. Raoule hews so closely to the symptoms of the hysterical woman that she could serve as either textbook case or ironic caricature. She is described as sexually deviant; her body is subject to intense spasms and tremors, especially quasi-sexual frissons; and her manner is “nervous,” the generic keyword of feminine disorder. In spite of the doctors who prescribe either marriage and childbearing, the convent, or the sanitarium as cures for her condition, she prefers to live the unruly life of the unrestrained hysteric, following her abnormal perversions to their gloomy, necrophiliac end.

Significantly, in a nod to a favored etiological trope of hysteria discourse, this novel blames novels, attributing Raoule’s disease to an errant volume discovered in childhood. After the flush of that early illicit reading experience, Raoule’s formerly healthy nerves and girlish morals are irrecuperable; she is a textbook case of the nineteenth-century literary phenomenon Beizer calls “novelsickness” (242).<sup>37</sup> It is easy to see, in the medical establishment’s expert opinion that female hysteria arises from “excessive” education, a coordinated patriarchal defense against mounting claims for women’s equal participation in society. But novelsickness also reveals a specific cultural anxiety about the power of a text, especially in female hands.<sup>38</sup> The book is a vector of infection, infiltrating its young reader and permanently altering her mind and body. It initiates her into the cycle of textuality that is hysteria, into a lifetime of slippage between reader, author, and text. The book, as origin of feminine disease, is identified as a particularly

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<sup>37</sup> “Novelsickness” as a plot point illustrates Beizer’s assertion of a reciprocal relationship between medical and literary representations of hysteria in the nineteenth century. The doctors treating patients at Salpêtrière and the writers imagining reading women influence each other, producing a shared cultural story of hysteria’s implications. Novelsickness manifests, for its particular cultural context, the much older trope of the corrupting power of fiction: in Dante’s *Inferno*, for instance, the adulterous passion of Francesca and Paolo is kindled through reading (Canto V).

<sup>38</sup> Although it is not femaleness that seems to matter as much as a state of receptiveness that is designated feminine. In Oscar Wilde’s famous Decadent novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian’s moral decay is attributed in part to the influence of an unnamed, depraved French novel—a possible reference to Huysmans’s *À rebours*.

lively object, an inanimate thing with the power to rewrite its human reader.<sup>39</sup>

Hysteria is discursively defined as a disease of femininity (if not necessarily femaleness). Raoule, however, only provisionally and performatively embodies tropes of femininity. Her “masculine” attributes—coldness, hardness, domination, and control—also complicate her relationship to hysteria, a disease predicated on fluidity and squishiness, excess, and a lack of bodily and emotional control. Thus Raoule’s hysterical side seems to contradict the side of her that wields aesthetic authority over Jacques. The hysterical state of passivity, of being subject to forces originating outside the self, interrupts her project of domination and mastery. A patriarchal reading might interpret that interruption as an inevitable consequence of her genderbending: that is, hampered by her essential femininity, Raoule can only fail to achieve the status of autonomous masculine author. But a reading more attuned to the queer, feminist, and posthumanist possibilities of the novel might suggest instead that hysteria functions here as a constitutive perturbation of all authorship, rather than a pathological aberration. Hysteria, and the ambivalent agency it entails, inserts itself into Raoule’s fantasy of total control. The gap between the ideal of an authorized masculine subject and her hysterical performance of that role exposes not her personal failure to appropriate authorial agency, but rather the unacknowledged and disavowed passivity upon which authorship itself depends.

Hysteria designates a space of overlap between Raoule and Jacques, between the

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<sup>39</sup> Several details mark Raoule as a kind of older cousin to Freud’s famous hysterical patient “Dora,” whom he treated for three months in 1900 and documented in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905). Like Raoule, the eighteen-year-old woman was hostile to her doctors; her stubborn refusal of Freud’s analytical interpretations and her early suspension of treatment figures prominently in her case study. And like Raoule, Dora is characterized by inappropriate, perverse sexuality that is learned from books—in Dora’s case, not novels but physiological textbooks. Dora is further corrupted by the influence of several well-read women, including her governess and a family friend. Raoule and Dora both take shape as figures of resistance to masculine authority; they illustrate, in different social contexts, how strong-minded, sexually aware, and educated women were insistently pathologized by hysteria discourse.

dominant masculinized subject and the submissive feminized object, between the artist and the work; indeed, although my reading focuses on Raoule as hysterical figure, the sensuous, impressionable Jacques also embodies the symptoms and tropes of hysteria discourse. Hysteria marks those moments where Raoule, the author of her lover, is herself authored by forces that are not quite “her”: by nervous fits, bodily convulsions, mystical desires. Most importantly, it explains how Jacques wields one of those forces, despite his powerlessness. Her hysteria provides a receptive field upon which his strange, passive agency can emerge, starting from their first fateful encounter at the Silverts’ run-down flower shop in the novel’s opening scene. Raoule goes through the motions of domination, playing the part of a haughty customer to Jacques’s abject service worker: she places her order, flashes her wealth, verbally belittles and insultingly gropes him. Everything she does is designed to establish her as his master. Yet, as Jacques’s sister notes triumphantly of Raoule, “elle en tient” (“she’s hooked”; 10; Hawthorne 18). It is Jacques who initiates their relationship: without intending to, he draws Raoule in, not by his own power but by his alluring nonpower.

Raoule experiences the force of Jacques’s allure as something other than her own desire, as a heightened state of bodily susceptibility to outside forces—that is, as a series of textbook hysterical symptoms. Being in Jacques’s presence physically overwhelms her. First she is assaulted by the revolting smell of apples cooking; then she is plagued by nervous spasms that control the movement of her body: “un frisson de dégoût” (“a shiver of disgust”; 7; Hawthorne 8), “une torpor singulière s’emparait d’elle” (“an extraordinary torpor was taking hold of her”; 8; Hawthorne 12), “un tremblement nerveux la secouait tout entière” (“a nervous tremor shook her all over”; 9; Hawthorne 15). Stroking Jacques’s chest is less an act of will than a neurotic

compulsion that she cannot disobey: “Une sorte de vertige l’attirait vers ce nu. Elle voulut faire un pas en arrière, s’arracher à l’obsession, fuir... Une sensualité folle l’étreignit au poignet” (“A kind of dizziness drew her to this nakedness. She wanted to step back, to tear herself away from the obsession, to flee... A mad sensuality seized her by the wrist”; 9; Hawthorne 17).

As medical symptoms, these hysterical frissons do not have anything particularly to do with Jacques. But within the broader significance of hysteria that I have been invoking—hysteria as agency in disarray—they show Raoule as something other than an autonomous agent, as subject to multiple competing forces. They intervene in the established channels of power and nonpower, providing a space where Jacques’s subservient, feminine passivity can master Raoule’s imperious dominance. The “instrument of pleasure” that she has determined to use and master establishes its own mysterious hold on her. This opening scene maps the uncertain terrain of power and agency in their relationship. Raoule is in control and yet controlled; she writes the script for her lover’s transformation and yet is written back upon by the irresistible force of his passivity.

For Jacques may be a book that Raoule is writing, as she claims to Raittolbe on the brink of her courtship; but within the hysterical framework of this novel, a book has considerable power to infect and influence a human. The reading girl is pathologically susceptible to being corrupted; the writing woman remains vulnerable to the strange power of her creation. Spying on Jacques in the bath, Raoule is stricken: “Poème effrayant de la nudité humaine, t’ai-je donc enfin compris, moi qui tremble pour la première fois en essayant de te lire avec des yeux blasés” (“O terrifying poem of human nudity, I understand you at last, I who tremble for the first time in trying to read you with blasé eyes”; 17; Hawthorne 40). She is, once again, a hysterical “reader,” this

time of her lover's sublime body; her diseased state is signaled by her telltale "mains nerveuses" ("nervous hands"; 17; Hawthorne 40). Like the depraved book of her childhood, this text sickens her to the point of nonhumanity—this time, to the state of feral animality often associated with female hysteria: "elle grondait comme grondent les panthères que vient de fustiger la souple cravache du dompteur" ("she was growling as panthers growl when the supple whip of the tamer has just thrashed them"; 17; Hawthorne 40). Yet there is no "whip" behind Jacques's power, which is borne of utter vulnerability. As a "poème effrayant," he wields not the power of a man over a woman or a human over an animal, but of a text over its reader and would-be author. Though she approaches this text with well-read "blasé eyes," thinking she can possess, master, and rewrite it to her liking, she finds herself utterly disarmed.

Thus to the idealized "homme de lettres," the title of socially legitimized male writer that Rachilde ironically claims for herself, the novel opposes a different model of authorship that involves both domination of and subjugation to the text, two forces that are intertwined and inseparable rather than antithetical. This hysterical alternative makes its mark even in what appears to be the novel's most explicit and cruelest instance of patriarchal authorship. In the ugly disputes between Raoule and the Baron de Raittolbe, Jacques's body, described above as a poem, becomes a more utilitarian kind of document, a kind of business letter exchanged between two masculine correspondents. The exchange begins in a scene already mentioned, when Raittolbe, simultaneously stirred and enraged by Jacques's naked body, beats him up, leaving a set of marks for Raoule to read and decipher on her lover's skin: "La peau fine de l'idole était zébrée de haut en bas de longues cicatrices bleuâtres" ("The idol's fine skin was striped from top to bottom with long, bluish scars"; 45; Hawthorne 128).

Though Jacques laughs at the possibility, Raoule can clearly read Raittolbe's desire in the bruises: "mes sens me disent trop ce que peuvent éprouver les sens d'un homme, fût-il honnête, en se trouvant face à face avec Jacques Silvert..." ("My senses tell me all too plainly what a man, even a gentleman, can feel, when he finds himself face to face with Jacques Silvert"; 45; Hawthorne 129). Raoule and Raittolbe, in other words, are fluent in a shared masculine language that intertwines violence and desire, while Jacques is illiterate: as an object of signification, he can serve only as the bearer, not the possessor, of that language. And both Raoule and Raittolbe perform the role of masculine writing subject with spectacular sadism. After tenderly bandaging Jacques's wounds, Raoule suddenly attacks him with brutal ardor, scratching and biting his skin in an attempt to overwrite the text inscribed by Raittolbe: "Il faut que j'efface chaque cicatrice sous mes lèvres" ("I must erase every scar with my lips"; 46; Hawthorne 130), she insists, oblivious to his piteous cries of pain.<sup>40</sup>

This scene could be read as a neat illustration of the discursive links between gender, hysteria, and textuality. If patriarchal conventions designate the feminine body as a vulnerable, helpless medium, inscribed and made legible by masculine discourse, then, one could argue, this novel inverts only to uphold that status quo, by having a masculine woman wield the patriarchal "pen" upon the body of a feminized man. The scene of writing violence presents Raoule as a cruel masculine *auteur*. She tries to achieve ultimate mastery by rendering her lover into a impressionable surface, obliterating all former inscriptions so that her own ideas and desires can be bloodily overwritten. As Beizer argues, "Jacques becomes a palimpsest. In and of himself

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<sup>40</sup> This scene shows clearly how the novel positions Jacques, too, as a hysterical medium. Like the dermatographic patients at the Salpêtrière, whose skin is inscribed by doctors and shown off as evidence of their pathology, Jacques is made to signify by the powerful competing discourses of Raoule and Raittolbe.

neither poet nor poem, artist or painting, he is instead a periodically reinscribed tablet or canvas passed back and forth in an ongoing conversation between Raoule and Raittolbe” (253).

Such is the patriarchal logic at work, certainly, in which feminine/feminized bodies (like Jacques’s) function as textual objects, authored by and exchanged between masculine subjects. And yet it would seem far too simple to say that *Monsieur Vénus* fully succumbs to that logic, preoccupied as it is with the agency of the apparently blank page, which is never as blank as it appears, nor quite the passive, pliable medium that the *auteur* demands. As the nonhuman object of Raoule’s use and abuse, Jacques clearly suffers, but he also participates zealously in his own dehumanization. The next time they meet after Raoule’s attack, he approaches her not with fear or reproach but with “l’amour servile de la bête reconnaissante” (“the servile love of the grateful animal”; 53; Hawthorne 151).

At the same time, Raoule’s own agency in her violent outburst is uncertain. As she acts first to nurse, then to batter the injured Jacques, the text emphasizes her lack of control over the situation. Her will is made irrelevant as she is possessed by a violent desire that arises from elsewhere: she is “envahie d’un vertige frénétique, d’un désir suprême” and “ne se maîtrisa plus” (“overcome by a frenetic vertigo, a supreme desire”; “could control herself no longer”; 45-46; Hawthorne 130-131). This wild outburst underscores a significant difference between Raittolbe’s and Raoule’s modes of “writing” violence upon Jacques’s body. The former beats him with a wooden stick, a metaphorical pen and phallus; the latter uses no instrument but her hands, teeth, and nails, embodying the hysterical trope of the woman as berserk animal. Scratching, biting, and thirsting for Jacques’s blood, Raoule yields to a state of frenzied savagery; what she inscribes on his hapless body is not the masterful script of the *auteur*, but a bestial, feminine scrawl, borne

of madness rather than deliberation. In fact, she functions more as hysterical medium than as author in this scene: violence is spoken through Raoule and written upon Jacques, though its actual origin is unclear. Both attacker and victim are passive mediums in thrall to an alien force.

The hysterical thread running through *Monsieur Vénus* ties the novel into the Decadent tradition, which tends to obsess over motifs of disease and decay. But the link is more than thematic; it has to do with the constitutively oppositional quality that makes Decadent writing potentially productive for this project. Gordon notes that many Decadent writers identify hysteria with “a mystical, creative force” (221) and celebrate it as the grounds for a new aesthetic of ugly oppositional femininity, shunned by the mainstream but appreciated by artistic elites: “The hysteric refuses the role imposed on her of the passive, beautiful woman. Instead, she is all uncontrollable movement, threatening to destroy all that surrounds her, even herself” (221). Even Barrès, writer of the condescending preface to *Monsieur Vénus*, acknowledges the power of the pathologically feminine (even as he trivializes it). Finn points out that the preface is “inclusive, that it takes very deliberate pains to include Rachilde in a noble filiation of male writers of whom Barrès also feels a part” (“Rachilde” 6). That literary heritage is masculine, but feminized: the Decadent “family” is a lineage of “superior, nerve-weakened beings” (Finn “Rachilde” 6) who, troubled by the physical world, seek a more mystical, spiritual plane through their work.

Poet Charles Baudelaire is one of the illustrious fathers of this line; elsewhere, Barrès christens Rachilde “Madame Baudelaire,” a feminine version of the already feminized male writer. Baudelaire serves as the delirious, sickly writer *par excellence*, the aesthetic model of the Decadent convalescent. Examining the rhetoric of disease throughout nineteenth-century writing, Barbara Spackman illustrates how Decadence defines itself through sickness, embracing



what is deemed pathological by medical and cultural norms. The sick body, in the dominant imagination, is abnormal, defective, and feminized by its loss of virility; Decadent writers seize upon the positive side of this characterization, embracing sickness as a site of alterity and the origin of a new aesthetic consciousness.

The Decadent tradition thus makes space for (and indeed privileges) hysterical authorship, a pathologically feminine creative force that involves receptivity and subjection to outside forces, the quelling of the self as it is possessed by the other. But as Spackman points out, when a primarily male-authored literary tradition embraces feminine creativity, the results are inevitably ambivalent. In one sense, Decadence constitutes an “occupation” of the feminine that is “dependent on the expulsion of woman from the scene of art” (*Decadent* 215); feminine creativity is not something that actual women are deemed capable of in the dominant Decadent imagination.<sup>41</sup> But alongside this appropriation of femininity is a “feminization of culture” (*Decadent* 215): the Decadents recognize and value the forces of otherness as what infect and upset the world of rational masculine subjectivity, and thus refuse the binary logic of sexual difference. They thus occupy, Spackman argues, “a precarious position, which, on the one hand, can fall into appropriation and yet, on the other, refuses the opposition that makes such appropriation possible” (*Decadent* 216).

As a woman who appropriates masculinity appropriating femininity, Raoule introduces another layer of complication into this tradition. She adopts the role of the masculine *auteur* in order to demonstrate how authorship is quintessentially “feminine”—that is, hysterical, irrational,

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<sup>41</sup> Baudelaire’s essay “Le peintre de la vie moderne” spells out this point in fine detail when it describes women as the objects and muses of male artistry—though for Baudelaire, female artifice constitutes its own form of authorship. Chapter 2 will discuss Baudelaire and the Decadent appropriation of feminine creativity in further detail.

nonhuman. Creativity, the novel suggests, is not the capacity of an individual artistic genius, but rather a collaborative process between artist and work that involves disturbing and inexplicable forces; no one maintains control for long. The violence of that process, then, is not something that Raoule imposes unilaterally upon Jacques; it emerges between them in a complicated tangle of agency and desire. Such a view might allow us to read the novel's necrophiliac ending against the grain: in the figure of Raoule returning nightly to the remnants of her lover's corpse, we might see not a triumphant sadist, but an artist still in thrall to her work.

## Conclusions

One might well ask what good it does to theorize Raoule's cruelty in this way. What difference does it make whether she commits partner violence by choice or by compulsion? For Jacques, the resulting gashes and bruises are the same. Similar questions hover over the novel as a whole. What do my questions about complicated, paradoxical, posthumanist agency have to do with a novel that might easily be read as a straightforward (though queered) narrative of abuse? What does it mean to talk about the agency of a lover who ends up dead? Is it possible to identify a kind of power in the objectified, without it becoming a distraction from—or worse, a justification of—the abuses of the objectifier? Can *Monsieur Vénus* be anything more than a woman writer's appropriation of what Naomi Schor calls “the nineteenth-century male writer's ultimate fantasy”: that is, “Galatea begging Pygmalion to turn her to stone” (144)?

These questions, which continue to resonate in the following chapter, make this text both frustrating and irresistible for a queer, feminist, and posthumanist project. *Monsieur Vénus*

leads the reader through dark and troubling places, at times seeming to parrot the worst tenets of patriarchal discourse and promote the marginalization and obliteration of the weak, the feminine, the abject, the animal. Yet by getting uncomfortably close to that discourse, Rachilde identifies and exploits its most radical possibilities. In the text of her life as well as her written work, she inscribes an alternative to gendered hierarchies of subject/object—not by openly opposing or simply reversing them, but by dwelling on the instabilities and vacillations at the heart of power itself. In this novel, the Decadent predilection for artifice does not mean only the rejection of biological sex, gender, and bodies; it also means taking seriously the possibility of losing the “natural” privileges of masculine human subjectivity and exploring what it is like to be an artificial object, a thing authored by another. Chapter 2 will pick up this thread in the context of another French Decadent novel, the quasi-science-fiction *L’Eve future*, along with its postmodern counterpart *The Passion of New Eve*. From the margins of those texts emerge a series of women who, like Jacques, demonstrate the ambivalence of feminine passivity and objectivity—a state that yields unexpected power and pleasure even as it imposes an often fatal vulnerability.

As a lively object, Jacques shifts between life and death, male and female, flesh and marble and wax. He exerts the peculiarly nonhuman, passive agency of the thing, the text. The counterpart to this lively object is Raoule, the hysterical subject, whose appropriation of the masculine power of absolute authorship is intertwined with her vulnerability to the forces of otherness (femininity, disease, animality). Jacques and Raoule suggest that passivity can be pleasurable, but also that it is inevitable—that there is no such thing as a fully autonomous agent. Agency and passivity, domination and subjection, power and nonpower are all inextricably bound; the rules that distinguish “who” from “what” cannot hold.

In *Monsieur Vénus*, this ambivalent notion of agency emerges with and against hysteria, a discourse that enables even as it pathologizes alternatives to the normative rational subject. Hysteria functions here not as a specific condition attributed to a particular diseased body, but as a field of possibility; it opens up a world in which agency emerges in startling and unconventional forms, sneaking around and through the boundaries of what is considered a proper subject. Hysteria is not the only means of accessing this kind of radical agential openness; other approaches emerge in other sets of texts. But here, hysteria makes possible the kind of posthumanism that concerns this project: a recognition of the (perhaps disturbing) agency of the “things” of this world—the feminine, the animal, the object. Anticipating the twenty-first century concerns of queer, feminist, and posthumanist scholarship, *Monsieur Vénus* speculates the dangerous, bizarre, and yet irresistible ways of being in the world that are precluded from the current regime of “the who and the what.”

## CHAPTER II

### **Eves of the Future: Cyborg Gender in Villiers's *L'Eve future* and Carter's *The Passion of New Eve***

Aimer zéro, dites-vous? ... qu'importe, si vous êtes l'unité placée devant ce zéro, comme vous l'êtes, d'ores et déjà, devant tous les zéros de la vie—et si c'est, enfin, le seul qui ne vous désenchante ni ne vous trahisse? (121)

How can you love a zero, you say? ... what difference does it make, if you are the unity joined to this zero? Aren't you always with the other zeroes in your life? Won't she be, finally, the only zero which can neither disenchant nor betray you? (154)

—Edison, *L'Eve future*

When I was a man, I could never have guessed what it would be like to be inside a woman's skin, an outer covering which records with such fidelity, such immediacy, each sensation, however fleeting.

—Eve(lyn), *The Passion of New Eve* (145)

Who—or what—is the perfect woman? Following the ornamental Decadent cyborg of Jacques Silvert in Chapter 1, who embodied his lover's fantasy of the feminized nonhuman, this chapter pairs two speculative visions of feminine perfection, two New Eves whose hyper-real womanhood emanates not from an ineffable feminine essence, but from the precise operation of human technology. Nearly a century separates the two novels in question, whose thematic and formal connections are rarely explored in depth.<sup>1</sup> *L'Eve future* was published in 1886 by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a French writer associated with the Decadent and Symbolist movements. It tells the tale of a fictionalized Thomas Edison, a brilliant scientist who, dismayed by the prevalence of treacherous females, constructs a flawless female robot as a bride for his long-suffering noble friend. *The Passion of New Eve*, published in 1977 by British writer Angela Carter, recounts the creation of another perfect woman; this one, however, lives several decades as a man before becoming the victim of unsolicited gender reassignment surgery executed by a radical feminist underground.

There is no way to neatly map the plot, characters, or structure of *The Passion of New Eve* onto *L'Eve future*. But reading them together yields a productive, if sometimes combative, conversation. Carter brings elements of a feminist critique to the misogynist extremes of Villiers's text, yet given the difficulties Carter has posed for decades of feminist scholarship, it would be an

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions include Marie Lathers and Maggie Tonkin, who each consider the critical resonance between the two novels.

oversimplification to read her novel as a feminist recuperation alone.<sup>2</sup> Carter's work is distinctly intertextual, drawing both implicitly and openly upon a largely male-authored European literary heritage (Gothic romance, Decadence, Surrealism, and more). In particular, Christina Britzolakis notes, Carter often cites her predecessors' tendency to stage femininity as spectacle, which can be read alternately as a collusion with or a subversion of misogynist tradition (49-50).<sup>3</sup> The precise nature of Carter's relationship to her self-defined heritage is never clear. A feminist comparative reading of the two works must thus do more than merely outline how Carter fixes what Villiers got wrong. On the contrary, both novels offer endorsements of, as well as hesitations about, the objectification of the feminine and the resulting possibilities for feminine/object agency; Villiers brings something valuable to a reading of Carter and vice versa. Together, the two works stage a powerful argument for the artificiality not only of patriarchal feminine ideals, but also of gender, and even humanity itself.

Both novels revolve around the production of femininity, pondering what it is made of and how it can be made better. Each centers on a specific act of creation, the construction of a perfect woman. And for each, technology enables the literal objectification of women, producing a female who is not a person but a specimen. Villiers's inventor Edison builds his future Eve, Hadaly, to be a wealthy gentleman's ideal mate, while Carter's inventor Mother builds her New Eve to be an emblem of reproductive perfection. Though neither inventor is much concerned

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<sup>2</sup> In an undated personal letter, Carter writes with characteristic wryness, "I had no intention, when I first started being published, of writing illustrative textbooks of late feminist theory to be used in institutions of education and the thought that I'm taught in universities makes me feel rather miserable. I stopped enjoying museums when I realised they were places where beautiful things go to die; I feel somewhat the same about literature departments..." ("Working Papers"). Though I strive in my own analysis to enliven, rather than fossilize, her work, I remain aware that it tends to exceed any formal or political categories I invoke.

<sup>3</sup> Britzolakis's own take is that Carter's "magpie-like" relation to the masculine Decadent canon runs the risk of fetishizing, rather than critiquing, its misogynist fantasies (50).

with the will and desires of the specimen herself, neither of the two Eves conforms passively to her intended program. They carve out their own forms of agency in defiance of a world that seeks to keep them obediently inert: Eve(lyn) as the writing subject, authoring her own story, and Hadaly as the evasive assemblage of woman and machine whose life and death prove ultimately to be out of her inventor's hands.<sup>4</sup>

But this chapter focuses not on the centerpieces Hadaly and Eve(lyn), but on the array of marginal artificial women also featured in these novels: Alicia Clary and Evelyn Habal of *L'Eve*, Leilah and Tristessa de St Ange of *New Eve*. Unlike the New Eves, who are perfected by manufacturing techniques that place these novels firmly in the realm of speculative fiction, these other women fashion their femininity in a more mundane manner, through the clothing, make-up, occupations, and everyday performances of womanhood.<sup>5</sup> Though their materials are limited to the elements of preexisting gender discourses, they are self-authored women, as opposed to Hadaly and Eve(lyn), authored according to another's program. But in these stories—at least, in the patriarchal cultures where they are staged—it is the self-authored women who are suspected, derided, and subjected to vitriol. Unlike Hadaly and Eve(lyn), they do not “pass” as acceptable

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<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to know how to refer to the narrator of *New Eve*, who changes name, body, and gender partway through the book. The importance of self-identification is a central tenet of transgender discourse, which emphasizes that it is both respectful and accurate to use a transgender person's preferred name, gender, and pronouns. But in this case, Evelyn becomes Eve against his will. He identifies fully as masculine before his transition; her subsequent feminine identity is not something she fully possesses or elects to, although it does, eventually, become her own. I have chosen to refer to the character as Eve(lyn), and to use masculine pronouns for the pre-operative, male-identified Evelyn and feminine pronouns to describe the post-operative Eve who retrospectively narrates the book. That is, I understand the narrator to be a woman who is still partially influenced by the man she used to be. I acknowledge, however, that these choices cannot fully represent the complex, multiple identities in play.

<sup>5</sup> The extent of Villiers's speculation is more extreme than that of Carter. Villiers describes Edison's project using impressively impenetrable scientific rhetoric, and in fact anticipates some of the real Edison's later work, but relies on quasi-mystical substances and explanations. The world has not yet seen anything quite like Hadaly, who passes the Turing test with flying colors. Eve(lyn)'s transition goes further than the current capabilities of hormonal and surgical gender confirmation procedures (also called sex reassignment), since she is equipped with a fully functioning uterus—she menstruates and is capable of bearing a child.



women: their femininity, as well as their personhood, is constantly called into question.

The concept of “passing” resonates richly in this chapter as a connecting point for disparate discourses of real versus artificial. To pass is to be identified as normal within one’s dominant cultural milieu—or rather, since a defining feature of normality is its ability to go unnoticed, to pass is not to be identified as abnormal. It refers to a person of color’s ability to be regarded as white in a society that privileges whiteness, a queer person’s ability to appear straight in a heteronormative world, a transgender person’s ability to live successfully as a member of their identified gender. The theoretical pinnacle of passing, as Sandy Stone notes in regard to transsexuality, is invisibility: a body that passes as female is understood to simply be female, while a body that fails to pass as female is understood to be visibly abnormal, artificial, marked by its deviation from the norm and thus vulnerable to being “read” (Stone 14-16). “Passing” also recalls the Turing test, a test of an artificial intelligence’s ability to fool humans into believing that it is human.

The cultural imperative to pass (as straight, as white, as properly gendered, as human) enforces the need to obey, or at least appear to obey, a strict separation of real (legitimate) from fake (illegitimate). In the difficult work of not passing, these women enact their critique of that logic. Accused of deception and artifice, they suffer much of the novels’ violence, both threatened and actual. They are the false women who should be replaced by their (ironically) more authentic, technologically constructed, ideal counterparts—at least, so decree the misogynistic patriarchal discourses voiced by various characters in both novels; the extent to which either text aligns itself with those discourses is a difficult question that I will pursue throughout this chapter.

Structured by the thematic refrain of real versus artificial, the two novels share an

attachment to character iteration: each presents a series of women, scrutinizing various models of femininity in a kind of narrative gallery. The women are figured as positive and negative ideals, fantasies of perfection or abjection. Some are active characters, while others materialize only as narrative figments, referred to in passing. In both cases, they are overwhelmingly constrained by the novels' dominant discourses, which tend either to deny them a voice altogether or mock, discredit and undermine their speech. My chapter mimics this gallery structure, focusing on Alicia, Leilah, Evelyn Habal, and Tristessa in turn to articulate what is at stake in each woman's rendition of femininity. Each one is judged within the text as artificial in one way or another: her divergence from a feminine ideal makes her not quite woman, or human, enough for the discourses that frame her. I aim not to reclaim these characters as "real women," but rather to learn from them what might be liberating, powerful, and necessary about being "fake." In the gallery of this chapter, the objects on display do not merely sit still, silently awaiting interpretation by their onlooker. Nor can I, the "curator," claim ownership over the meaning that emerges from the exhibit, for it is the lively intertextual relations between these women that guides my arrangement. I seek to uncover and amplify the conversation between these two texts, to listen to what these four women might say to each other as they conspire on an alternative, resistant, and highly speculative definition of femininity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A complete gallery of femininity in these novels would include a number of other women, who deserve more than the fleeting attention I am able to give them here. *L'Eve* contains Sowana, the hysterical and somnambulant medium whose collaboration, though downplayed by Edison, is crucial to the construction and animation of Hadaly; Mrs. Any Anderson, the wife that Edward rejects for Evelyn Habal; and Mrs. Edison, who is mentioned but entirely absent. *New Eve* contains a nameless girl who fellates Evelyn at the movies before he leaves England; Sophia, one of Mother's agents who tends to Eve(lyn) before and after surgery; and Lilith, guerrilla soldier in the Women's Army. I list these characters to emphasize the iterative quality of the femininity so intensely scrutinized in these novels. The women of this series are archetypes, versions of one another, sometimes literally: Sowana and Mrs. Anderson are revealed to be the same woman, as are Leilah, Sophia, and Lilith. I chose to focus on these four particular women because of their relative narrative significance, and because they form two pairs—Alicia and Leilah, Evelyn Habal and Tristessa—that help illustrate the novels' intertextual kinship.

## Yesterday's Eve of the future: situating Villiers and Carter

I turn now to a more detailed overview of these two complicated, unsettling, often bizarre narratives and the critical approaches they have inspired. The protagonist of *L'Eve future* is a fictionalized Thomas Edison, a renowned inventor at the height of his worldwide celebrity. In his top-secret Menlo Park laboratory, he is at work on the ultimate invention: an Andreid, a female automaton who represents everything desirable about femininity but is under the total control of her male master.<sup>7</sup> One evening, Edison receives a visit from an old friend: the young Lord Ewald, noble of spirit as well as title, is distraught and on the verge of suicide. Alicia, the woman he loves, radiates with the ideal beauty of Venus de Milo, but her personality is too bourgeois, banal, and calculating to fulfill his dream of authentic love. Edison promises Ewald that the Andreid, named Hadaly, can serve as a perfect representation of his beloved, only improved. Where the real Alicia is vapid, the false Alicia will be programmed to project full human intelligence and interiority, and will thus be even more real than the real. Ewald protests that a simulacrum cannot possibly fulfill his love, but he is eventually seduced by Edison's persuasion and by the charms of the Andreid; he takes her away to live in wedded bliss forever. This happy ending of human-cyborg coupling is overturned in the final lines of the novel, when Edison learns that the Andreid has been destroyed in a shipwreck and, deprived once more of his true love, Ewald resumes his suicidal despair.<sup>8</sup>

Like his contemporary Rachilde, Villiers is a figure of ideological and political am-

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<sup>7</sup> Villiers employs the apparent neologism *Andréide* rather than the more common French word *Androïde*; Marilyn Gaddis Rose preserves the unfamiliar term "Andreid" in her translation.

<sup>8</sup> This synopsis, brief as it is, overstates the amount of action in this novel of exposition. As Rose emphasizes in her translator's introduction, almost nothing actually happens; nearly all the third-person narration serves to contextualize Edison's extensive monologues (vi).

bivalence. Marie Lathers describes him as an aristocratic dandy, preoccupied by some pervasive paradoxes of the French *fin de siècle*: “while emulating the feminine, he rejected woman; while fetishizing the artifice of machines, he rejected the industrial age” (*Aesthetics* 27). *L’Eve future* leaves both paradoxes firmly unresolved. Its misogynist assertion that women should be replaced with machines is paired with the shadowy sense of a feminine, machinic, and spiritual power beyond masculine control. Ritch Calvin highlights how Villiers’s well-documented suspicion of the salvationist possibilities of science and technology makes the novel’s glorification of Edison, and the apparent success of his project to create a transcendent machine, quite puzzling. To Calvin, the abrupt *deus ex machina* ending proclaims that Edison’s technology is ultimately not viable (357); and yet the entirety of the novel is dedicated to proving that it is, to overcoming Ewald’s humanist shudders and establishing the plausibility and desirability of artificial (feminine) life. Only the circumstance of the shipwreck, which might be an act of God, a suicidal sabotage conducted by Hadaly, or a mere accident, intervenes; furthermore, Ewald’s imminent suicide attests, though tragically, to the success of Edison’s project: the young gentleman chooses to die rather than live without his mechanical bride.

*L’Eve future* and its author’s oeuvre languished in obscurity for years after Villiers’s death. The persistent attention of a handful of devoted scholars, however, eventually resulted in a wider audience that “has at last caught up with him” (Anzalone 13)—Villiers’s work sketches out problems of modernity that are still pressing over a century later, such as artificial intelligence, the constructedness of gender, and the boundary between human and machine. Critics place the novel within a long tradition of science fiction (Daniel Gerould) and link it to Mary Shelley’s classic SF text *Frankenstein* (Calvin); situate it within discourses of early cinema (Lathers) and

the mass culture of modernity (Rhonda Garelick); and connect it to both oppressive and liberatory discourses of the feminine (Lathers, Garelick, Asti Hustvedt, Jennifer Forrest).

Carter's *Passion of New Eve* both draws upon and, in its own way, contributes to these critical approaches, functioning as an implicit rejoinder to Villiers's *L'Eve future*. Though Carter's oeuvre often refers to and revises Decadent literature, here the link is indirect; neither Villiers nor his text are ever mentioned by name, but the major plot points, character tropes, and discourses that constitute *L'Eve future* resurface, transformed, in *New Eve*'s postmodern apocalypse. Like Lord Ewald, Evelyn is an English dandy come to America; like both Ewald and Edison, he holds fervent and problematic ideas about the proper place and function of women in society.<sup>9</sup> Unlike his narrative predecessors, who conspire to construct a new ideal woman, Evelyn becomes her. The aspiring professor moves to New York City for a job, but finds the nation in chaos: the threat of sudden violence permeates the streets as gangs organized by race and gender become increasingly militarized. After his brief, passionate affair with the luscious Leilah ends in boredom and a botched abortion, Evelyn flees the city for the California desert. There he is captured by a band of radical feminists led by Mother, a former plastic surgeon who performs sex reassignment surgery on an unwilling Evelyn, renamed Eve. The New Eve, a technically and aesthetically perfect specimen of femininity, is destined to "reactivate the parthenogenesis archetype" (65) by becoming pregnant with sperm extracted via rape from her pre-operative body. Eve(lyn) escapes before the appointed insemination and confronts a series of trials: she is forced to become the eighth wife of a sadistic phallocrat; she finds, falls in love with, and loses Tristessa, the reclusive icon of Old Hollywood glamour whose performances of feminine pathos

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<sup>9</sup> In one of the particular details that link the two works, Carter's narrator shares his birth name with Villiers's femme fatale Evelyn Habal, who is discussed in further detail below.

had shaped young Eve(lyn)'s own notions of gender and desire; finally, she braves a mystical journey to the origins of time in Mother's cave. At the novel's end, the possibly pregnant Eve(lyn) sails off the coast of war-torn California in a plastic rowboat.

Showcasing diverse technologies of being and becoming woman, these two tales intimate the peculiarly inhuman technicity of gender; despite their frequent vocalization of misogynist tropes, they therefore offer something of value to a feminist posthumanist project. In particular, the pair of novels yields points of complex engagement with theories of gender performativity. The four marginalized women in the spotlight of this chapter are all performers: Alicia the virtuoso, Leilah the stripper, Evelyn Habal the dancer, Tristessa the actor. Each is professionally and personally engaged in the practice Joan Riviere names "womanliness as masquerade," embodying femininity to an excessive degree in order to wear it as a mask. "The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance," Mary Ann Doane argues. "To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image" ("Film" 81-82)—that is, between a woman and the hegemonic image of Woman. But that potentially subversive distance also brings danger for the four performing women. Each is accused by the patriarchal discourses voiced in the novels of falsifying, not authentically being, their female selves.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity holds the key to disassembling that misogynic logic of real versus fake gender. Performativity participates in a critical genealogy that seeks to de-naturalize the most intimate threads of the fabric of human being. Its roots can be traced, for instance, to Michel Foucault, who identifies a "technology of sex," proposing that sexuality emerges only through a complex set of political, discursive, and institutional

techniques (123). Teresa de Lauretis, responding to Foucault, specifies a “technology of gender” (*Technologies* 38), arguing that “gender, too... is the product of various social technologies, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as the practices of daily life” (2). Performativity takes a further step to intervene in the myth of gender as a natural, given, and stable property of bodies, but not by equating gender with performance: that is, performativity does not interpret gender as an act or role willfully undertaken by an autonomous subject. The theory’s claim is more fundamental: Butler proposes that the human subject materializes through the forcible, constant reiteration of gender norms, and that no subject exists prior to or outside of gender. Femininity and masculinity are thus not essential bodily attributes, but ideal constructs that compel and interpellate bodies from birth to death and beyond, reiterating the gender norms that are as impossible to fully achieve as they are to escape. Butler argues that “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect an consequence of the imitation itself” (“Imitation” 313). Thus there is no such thing as “truth” when it comes to gender; there is only the reiteration of norms, and the culturally judged successes and failures of a body to conform to them. This notion exonerates the four women from the charges of fraud and deception levied against them: their various failures to live up to the prescription of authentic femininity signify not falseness, but different modes of resistance to the oppressive norms that guard the boundaries of “real womanhood.” Though none are explicitly feminist or political, all four participate in what J. Halberstam calls “shadow feminisms,” politics that emerge “not from a doing but from an un-doing, not from a being or becoming women but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been de[FB01?]ned and imagined within Western philosophy”

(*Queer Art* 124).

Pairing Carter's fiction with Butler's performativity theory is a widespread scholarly trope, to the point that several critics caution against "Butlerification," noting that the dominance of a single theoretical framework tends to limit possible readings and, in this case, may serve to appropriate Carter's work too readily, even carelessly, into contemporary queer feminist politics, ignoring potential points of conflict.<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging wrinkles and contradictions with regard to both texts, however, my reading invokes performativity as a potential vector of both feminism and posthumanism. To understand gender as performative means to recognize it as not only inessential, but also inhuman. While the notion of gender as performance suggests human agency—one chooses to perform this way or that—the notion of gender as performative suggests that the agency at work is much more difficult to attribute: it belongs to no individual human subject, nor to any other personified deterministic force. Defining gender as the forcible reiteration of norms suggests a kind of machinery with no on-off switch and no human operator. "There is no power that acts," Butler writes, "but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (*Bodies* 9). In this sense, gender is an active network of relations that exists prior to and enables the emergence of the human (7). It is, as Halberstam argues, a "technological production" (440) and an "imitative system" (443); its social centrality marks humans as, in some sense, automated machines, cybernetic cousins to the experimental, boundary-blurring forms of artificial intelligence they create ("Automating Gender").

Many people, feminist and otherwise, object vehemently to the notion of technology

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<sup>10</sup> Joanna Trevenna, Rachel Carroll, and Tonkin all offer critiques of the scholarly "Butlerification" of Carter's work. Trevenna, who coined the term, observes that "Butlerifiers" tend to limit their focus to the overtly theatrical motifs in Carter's fiction and thus conflate performance and performativity, interpreting femininity as a role self-consciously adopted by a subject whose a priori "true self" is hiding beneath her gender-costume.



penetrating the foundations of human life; Halberstam, for instance, outlines a tradition of feminist resistance to technology understood as a militaristic, phallogocentric colonizing force. But identifying gender as a technology is not, in this case, a call to free ourselves from it, nor to return to some imaginary pre-technical gender essence; my argument resists the technophobic narrative of technology as an external force that contaminates and degrades an authentic, organic humanity. Instead, performativity suggests that gender is one aspect of the originary technicity of humankind, introducing an artificiality, a thing-ness, into the person that it helps constitute. Donna Haraway suggests the cyborg, hybrid of machine and organism, as a powerful feminist figure whose very ambivalence offers a critical alternative to the hierarchical binary oppositions that tend to structure the possibilities of human being (“Manifesto for Cyborgs”). In my reading of these two novels, I draw upon the specifically technical aspect of gender performativity in order to articulate how a gendered human is also a cyborg, subject to, though not enslaved by, the constantly reiterated, multiple, and contradictory programs of masculinity and femininity.

Chapter 1 identified the relationship between artist and work as a site of uncertain, ambivalent authorship, where boundaries of human/nonhuman and subject/object are breached. This chapter locates the enactment of femininity as another such site, positing gender as a vital force whose authorial origins are always in dispute and whose effects are unclear. There is no recourse to “authentic” humanity any more than to “authentic” femininity (or masculinity). As in Chapter 1, here a framework of ambivalence troubles the search for solid, immovable conclusions. “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course,” Haraway writes, “is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” (“Manifesto for Cyborgs” 193). This chapter, focusing on a specifically gendered version of the cyborg, deals with a

related problem: the main trouble with the figure of the artificial woman is its pernicious lineage in ancient patriarchal ideologies of female deception. “But,” Haraway counters, “illegitimate children are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (193). In the spirit of Haraway’s manifesto, which uses the cyborg to build “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, and for responsibility in their construction” (192), this chapter chooses to celebrate, rather than deride, the artificial woman, following her subversive movement across the contested boundaries of true and false being.

As both Butler and Haraway argue, the neat categories of “true” female, male, and human being are not simply there; they are made to happen by long-standing, coercive traditions of inclusion and exclusion, by technologies of personification (for those who can be made to comply with the norms) and objectification (for those who cannot). The four women I highlight in *L’Eve future* and *New Eve* suffer the application of those technologies: designated as false women by the patriarchal discourses that constrain them, they are excluded, often viciously, from the realm of the human. This exclusion occurs within the texts as well as the scholarship that surrounds them. There is a tendency, both diegetic and critical, to set up oppositions between the novels’ iterations of constructed femininity: between real and fake, central and marginal, valid and invalid forms. Edison, for instance, proclaims that a technologically artificial, male-authored woman is more authentic than a naturally artificial, self-authored one. Mother takes the opposite tack, asserting that a deliberately female-constructed woman is better than one constructed haphazardly out of patriarchal discourses. Some critical readings of *New Eve*, discussed in more detail below, echo the tendency to oppose and rank female types when they posit Tristessa, a transgender woman, as inauthentic in relation to the novel’s other constructed (but cisgender)

women.<sup>11</sup> I trace instead the kinship between these different models of femininity to undermine oppositions of real/fake and natural/artificial. All the women demonstrate the peculiar inhumanity of femininity and gender itself. Not only a performance but also a technology, femininity exerts its own mechanical force; it is neither freely chosen nor essentially determinate. It renders its user something other than fully human, a cyborg combination of person and thing. On the one hand, this cyborg status makes her vulnerable to exploitation, rejection, and violence; on the other hand, it offers her a way out of the constricting structures of patriarchal humanism, a form of agency that emerges because, not in spite, of objectification. This hybrid feminine/object agency is a delicate thing. In a world where weakness is quickly exploited, it finds little room to flourish. As these women attest, it is indeed a dangerous way to live. But it exists nonetheless, functioning not as an accident or mistake but as a legitimate and beckoning alternative to the humanist ideal of genuine, autonomous, uncontaminated subjectivity.

## 1. “Ah! qui m’ôtera cette âme de ce corps?”: Miss Alicia Clary

The problem of Miss Alicia Clary, Lord Ewald’s beloved, precipitates the plot of *L’Eve future*. Although the woman herself makes an appearance and even interjects a few lines of dialogue into this largely monologic novel, her presence is notably constrained by the

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<sup>11</sup> A back-formation of transgender, cisgender uses the Latin prefix *cis-*, the antonym of *trans-*, to indicate that one identifies with the gender one was assigned at birth, whereas transgender indicates that one identifies with a different gender from the one assigned at birth. Cisgender names and thus defamiliarizes a gender identity that is conventionally assumed to be “normal.” For that reason, it is extremely useful for the argument of this chapter: it signals that gender is not a natural or given state, that it emerges out of the significant work involved in identifying with or against social and biological norms. The term emerged in scholarly publications in the 1990s but has achieved selective mainstream usage in the last few years; in 2014, for instance, Facebook began including “cisgender” and a number of variations (such as “cis female”) as custom gender options for user profiles. Related terms include cisnormativity and cissexism, both referring to the cultural normalization of cisgender identity.

overdetermining discourse of the two male protagonists. From the start, Alicia is defined by the devastating pain she unwittingly inflicts on her lover; never considered a person in her own right, she is instead characterized as the reason for his impending suicide. Alicia's fatal flaw, Ewald assesses, is that her appearance and essence are distressingly at odds. No ordinary beauty, Alicia physically embodies the ideal woman, as if a classical statue had come to life: "c'est, en vérité, la splendeur de la *Vénus Victrix* humanisée" ("she is, really and truly, the splendor of a humanized *Venus Victrix*"; 26; Rose 31-32).<sup>12</sup> To a noble-minded soul like Ewald, her outward appearance of feminine perfection promises a corresponding spiritual perfection: here is a woman capable of authentic love, of actualizing the eternal romantic ideals of poets across the ages.

And yet, Ewald bemoans, "entre le corps et l'âme de miss Alicia, ce n'était pas une disproportion qui déconcertait et inquiétait mon entendement: c'était un *disparate*" ("between Miss Alicia's body and soul, there was not a disproportion which disconcerted me... There was a disparity!"; 27; Rose 33). The perfect shell houses an utterly banal personality. In Ewald's eyes, Alicia manifests the worst extremes of bourgeois modernity: she is calculating, positivistic, and dismissive of the poetic principles Ewald holds so dear. Worst of all, she judges her own transcendent charms to have a practical and economic, not metaphysical, value. Ewald relates her story: jilted by a scofflaw fiancé, and admittedly no longer a virgin, Alicia decides to enter

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<sup>12</sup> "Venus Victrix" (Venus the Victorious) is one of the epithets of the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and desire. Though there is a statue titled *Venus Victrix* (a neoclassical portrait sculpted by Antonio Canova in 1805-1808), the novel makes it clear that its prototypical Venus is the Venus de Milo, the ancient Greek statue created around 130-100 B.C. and unearthed from a field of ruins in 1820. Purchased by a French ambassador, it was whisked to the Louvre in 1821. The iconically beautiful statue is famous for its missing arms. Chapter 3 of Lathers's *Aesthetics of Artifice* describes at length the significance of sculpture and the Venus de Milo in Villiers's cultural context. Sculpture, Lathers argues, converges in the nineteenth century with hysteria and hypnosis, all discourses concerned with immobilizing, inscribing, and fragmenting women. Barbara Johnson cites the importance of Parnassianism, a movement of nineteenth-century French poetry that included many devoted apostrophes to statues, to Decadent writing; "in France," she notes, "the figure of the female beloved was easy to see in the single stone individual" (111).

the theater business as a virtuoso, to achieve financial independence and social standing.<sup>13</sup> One might judge, along with translator Marilyn Gaddis Rose, that “what she says and does reveals considerable resourcefulness for a sheltered middle-class girl of the mid-1870’s, out on her own at age twenty” (vii); to Ewald, however, Alicia’s attachment to bourgeois social norms and her desire to monetize her beauty (to exchange it first for theatrical employment, later for a respectable marriage) infuse her every word and deed with irredeemable mediocrity.

Why, the reader may well ask, does Lord Ewald cling to Alicia—a woman who appalls him, whom he spends pages and pages denouncing with rank disgust—even to the verge of suicide? Why can he not simply walk away in pursuit of a more compliant mate? The answer has to do with the discourses of real versus fake femininity that hold so much weight in these novels. Alicia looks like the feminine ideal; to Ewald, her banal personality thus amounts to a broken promise, a cruel deception. Her beauty is no genetic accident, but a living embodiment of the poetic feminine ideal. It belongs not to her, but to the world of men like Ewald, elite geniuses who dreamed up the ideal and maintain possession of it. As Ewald explains to Edison, “les lignes de sa beauté divine semblaient *lui* être étrangères; ses paroles paraissaient dépaysées et gênées dans sa voix. Son être intime s’accusait comme en contradiction avec sa forme” (“the contours of her divine beauty seemed alien to her. Her words seemed out of place and embarrassed in her voice. Her intimate being stood out as if in contradiction with her form”); it is enough to make him suspect that “cette femme s’était égarée en ce corps,—et qu’il ne lui appartenait pas” (“this woman had strayed into this body and that it didn’t belong to her”); 27; Rose 33-34). In Ewald’s

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<sup>13</sup> A virtuoso, Ewald hastens to point out, is completely distinct from an artist. Artists are those “creators who awaken intense, unknown, and sublime impressions” (46); performers, like Alicia, translate art into mere talent, sublimity into a gig. Singing for her is a trade, not an act of poetry.

cultural tradition, Alicia's body signifies a perfection that is scrambled into meaninglessness by her personality. She is not ignorant of her own value; she understands that her beauty and musical talent are qualities of great worth. But she destroys them, Ewald judges, by commodifying them, by making a living off her proximity to aesthetic ideals. She exploits her perfection without comprehending it, a business that Ewald interprets as the theft or desecration of beauty that ought to belong to him.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, in the dramatic narrative Ewald presents to his confidant Edison, there is an obvious victim. It is not the young woman whose lover conceals his hatred for her under a performance of dutiful chivalry; it is the young man who has been "deceived" by his beloved's counterfeit perfection. In a curious rhetorical inversion, Ewald invokes the discourse of rights to explain his affliction:

Demandais-je tant de beauté, au prix de tant de misère? Non. J'ai DROIT de me plaindre... De quel droit n'a-t-elle pas de génie, ayant une telle beauté! De quel droit cette forme sans pareille vient-elle faire appel, au plus profond de mon âme, à quelque amour sublime pour en démentir la foi!... Je ne suis pas un amant, mais un prisonnier. (40)

Did I ask for so much beauty at the price of so much misery? No. I have the right to complain... What right does she have not to have genius when she is so beautiful? By what right does her unparalleled form make an appeal to the very depths of my soul, to a sublime love, only to belie my faith in it?... I'm no lover; I am a prisoner. (49)

Here, the right of a poetic ideal to exist in its pure state, and the right of a sensitive man to the soul-stirring appreciation of it, trumps a woman's right to be a human being. He is her prisoner, the victim of her pernicious flaw. Walking away is not an option.

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<sup>14</sup> Ewald's distaste for the ordinary processes of making a living reveals the class elitism underlying his problem with Alicia. To the nobleman, her self-commodification is crassly bourgeois: it signifies not a practical response to circumstances but a fundamental spiritual deficit. Most men, Ewald and Edison agree, would not be deterred by, or even notice, the fatal disparity between Alicia's soul and her body. It is Ewald's fine blue blood that makes their union unbearable to him. Edison's solution is likewise designated only for the male elite: the Andreid is not destined for any common man. The ideological tension in this novel between *objets d'art* and mass-produced commodities resurfaces below, in the section on Evelyn Habal.

The breathtaking resemblance between Alicia and the statue of the Venus de Milo is the key to her fatal appeal. As the novel emphasizes repeatedly, Alicia is the very image of Venus come to life. But it is precisely the transformation of marble into flesh that causes problems for Ewald: living women, cursed with reason, fail to comply with the standards of femininity modeled by the statue. Like Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, *L'Eve future* draws upon and complicates the ancient myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor, and Galatea, his ivory bride come to life. Ewald, one might say, already has what Pygmalion prayed desperately to the gods to receive: a woman who is the living incarnation of a statue. But in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the brief recounting of Pygmalion and Galatea's love story ends abruptly in their honeymoon phase, the woman having spoken nary a word. What becomes of their relationship when the statue starts to speak, make demands, and perhaps disagree with her husband/creator?

Ewald's tale dramatizes this "what if?" scenario of statue-love gone sour, positioning Alicia as a failed Galatea—that is, one who opens her mouth. Revealing the paradoxes of patriarchal discourses of femininity, Ewald complains that "le seul malheur dont soit frappée miss Alicia, c'est la pensée!—Si elle était privée de toute pensée, je pourrais la comprendre. La Vénus de marbre, en effet, *n'a que faire de la Pensée*" ("the sole misfortune afflicting Miss Alicia is reason. If she were deprived of all reason, I could understand her. The marble Venus, after all, has nothing to do with reason"; 36; Rose 45). Though the novel later condemns women for irrationality, here an excess of reason distinguishes Alicia from her romantic lover.<sup>15</sup> The statue of Venus, beauty incarnate, does not think; she lets herself be thought by the beholder. That is,

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<sup>15</sup> One of this novel's great (unacknowledged) ironies is that Alicia is condemned for her positivistic, calculating nature, while Edison is glorified for his.

the ideal woman exists in a state of vacancy, awaiting occupation by the masculine discourse that will give her beauty meaning. Alicia has the potential to be such a vessel for the thoughts of others, but spoils it whenever she opens her mouth: “Ce sens de la statue que Vénus Victrix exprime avec ses lignes, miss Alicia Clary... pourrait l’inspirer comme son modèle,—si elle se taisait et fermait les paupières” (“This sense which the statue of Venus Victrix expresses with its lines, Miss Alicia... could inspire as well as her prototype—if she kept quiet and closed her eyes”; 36-37; Rose 45). Ironically, her trite conversation precludes a properly feminine vacancy. “Afflicted” by reason, Alicia supplies her own discourse rather than silently awaiting possession by her lover’s discursive ideal.

Ewald fails to acknowledge, however, that a woman might have her own reasons for rejecting ideality. He can only interpret Alicia’s divergence from the statue as failure, not resistance. In an incident he recounts to Edison, Ewald takes Alicia to the Louvre and places her face-to-face with her marble counterpart in a mad attempt to force an epiphany. Alicia’s first response is to identify with the image—“Tiens, MOI!” (“She looks like me!”)—but immediately differentiates herself: “Oui, mais moi, j’ai mes bras, et j’ai l’air plus distingué” (“Yes, but, of course, I have my arms, and I have a more distinguished bearing!”; 41; Rose 51). Ewald interprets this remark as the epitome of girlish stupidity, but in a different light, it acts as a powerful proclamation of feminine agency. Alicia may resemble this silent, ossified, and carefully curated model of womanhood, but she insists on a difference, refusing quite literally to be “dis-armed” by Ewald’s romantic notions. Unlike the statue, she will think and act for herself, and not merely reflect the aesthetic contemplation of onlookers. As Barbara Johnson notes wryly, “living is truly what Alicia does wrong: a live person can never be an *object* as well as a dead person—or a



stone person. Behaving like a *subject* is often a beautiful woman's mistake" (128).

Ewald's unfavorable comparison of Alicia to Venus recalls a key text by one of Villiers's Decadent forefathers, the influential mid-nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, whose writings on art, beauty, decay, and the experience of modernity set aesthetic and formal foundations for the subsequent Decadent tradition, also urges women to emulate statues, in two senses. A statue is first of all an aesthetic ideal, far more perfect than the natural human body plagued by vulgar blemishes. Secondly, in an assertion Lord Ewald would no doubt applaud, a statue exemplifies a woman's ideal function as the silent, passive, vacant medium of men's activity. Woman, Baudelaire writes in his 1863 essay "Le peintre de la vie moderne" ("The painter of modern life"), is "l'être... pour qui et par qui se font et défont les fortunes; pour qui, mais surtout *par qui* les artistes et les poètes composent leurs plus délicats bijoux" ("the being... for whom, and through whom, fortunes are made and unmade; for whom, but above all *through whom*, artists and poets create their most exquisite jewels"; 21; Mayne 30). In this sense, the association between women and statues reinforces their shared lack of agency; both are understood as objects to be admired and given meaning by male onlookers.

However, the misogyny evident in such a claim is undercut at least partially by Baudelaire's willingness to recognize, even glorify, feminine self-authorship. Ironically, it takes hard work to appear as lifeless and inert as a statue, and Baudelaire values that feminine labor highly. In a famous section of the essay titled "Eloge du maquillage" ("In praise of cosmetics"), his aim is "de venger l'art de la toilette" ("to vindicate the art of the dressing-table"; 22; Mayne 31) against those critics who would decry fashion and make-up as deceitful frippery. "La femme est bien dans son droit, et même elle accomplit une espèce de devoir en s'appliquant à paraître magique

et surnaturelle,” he asserts. “Il importe fort peu que la ruse et l'artifice soient connus de tous, si le succès en est certain et l'effet toujours irrésistible” (“Woman is quite within her rights, indeed she is even accomplishing a kind of duty, when she devotes herself to appearing magical and supernatural... It matters but little that the artifice and trickery are known to all, so long as their success is assured and their effect always irresistible”; 23; Mayne 33). In a crucial divergence from Lord Ewald, Baudelaire acknowledges the difference between true transcendence and its skillful approximation—the first is impossible, the second delightful. Unlike Ewald, Baudelaire recognizes that women cannot actually be statues, but he praises them for the work they put into appearing like statues, work that constitutes a legitimate duty rather than a frivolous and dishonest hoax.

Most importantly, a woman like Alicia, whose labors of self-construction are visible, is not judged as false in Baudelaire’s framework. Indeed, the truth of womanhood is infected with artifice at its core, an attribute that Baudelaire celebrates, rather than condemns. A woman is identified as a body plus its toilette, the biology inextricable from the technologies of fashion that decorate it: “Tout ce qui orne la femme, tout ce qui sert à illustrer sa beauté, fait partie d’elle-même” (“Everything that adorns woman, everything that serves to show off her beauty, is part of herself”; 22; Mayne 30). Feminine artifice, rather than a suspicious deviation from a purely authentic norm, is thus a normal state of being. Even though Baudelaire speaks of women as the passive instrument of men’s affairs, he also acknowledges them as the architects of their own unnatural selves, models of creative vitality for male artists to emulate. As problematic as it is to argue that a woman’s greatest achievement is to appear as a work of art for the admiring male gaze, Baudelaire nonetheless describes a specifically feminine genius, the masterful skill

of she who is artist and work combined. This ambivalence toward female agency underlies Baudelaire's theorization of a woman as "une espèce d'idole, stupide peut-être, mais éblouissante, enchanteresse, qui tient les destinées et les volontés suspendues à ses regards" ("a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching, who holds wills and destinies suspended on her glance"; 21; Mayne 30).<sup>16</sup> For Ewald, in contrast, the ideal woman is a mere statue, an object that offers beauty to the male spectator and commands nothing in return.

With their different formulations of women as aesthetic objects, both Ewald and Baudelaire place significant constraints on the possibilities of feminine being. Yet only Baudelaire retains the option of agency for the women he designates as objects.<sup>17</sup> Given her situation as a single woman in a capitalist, patriarchal society, Alicia may have no alternative to life as an object. But the kind of object she wishes to be is Baudelaire's idol, rather than Ewald's statue—not an immobile, silent museum piece, but a commodity that fetches a satisfying tribute in exchange for its beauty; not an authentic specimen of womanhood whose soul and body are in perfect, organic harmony, but a cyborg assemblage whose adroit exploitation of artifice makes her no less real.

The admiration that Baudelaire might bestow upon this self-made woman is denied to her by this text. Alicia acknowledges the values and norms of her cultural moment as arbitrary and even misogynist; rather than fight against patriarchal norms, however, she chooses strategically to use them to her own advantage, to sell herself however she can without ever fully buying into the system by which she profits. This appropriation and manipulation of feminine beauty

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<sup>16</sup> An idol is an object recognized as more-than-object, wielding divine power in its inanimate materiality. Chapter 1 explored how the ambivalent agency of the idol figures in *Monsieur Vénus*: naming Jacques as her idol is one way Raoule acknowledges his paradoxical power over her.

<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire's relative generosity is in line with his sympathy for female prostitutes, who figure notably his poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* and other works. As Charles Bernheimer notes, prostitution came to attention in nineteenth-century France as the subject of artistic, literary, legal, medical, and sociological representation, often epitomizing a set of contradictory male fantasies about female sexuality (*Figures* 1).

marks Alicia as a “fake” woman in Ewald’s eyes, one incapable of functioning as a mute object for masculine aesthetic contemplation. The reactionary project described in *L’Eve future* is to reestablish masculine ownership and authorship of femininity, to shore up an ideal against its erosion by the lived experience of actual women. “Ah! qui m’ôtera cette âme de ce corps?” (“Ah, who will remove that soul from that body for me?”; 40; Rose 49), Ewald sighs; luckily for him, his friend Edison has the technology to separate Alicia’s ideal parts from her intractable ones—to construct a more authentic version of what Alicia, in the patriarchal imaginary, can only pretend to be. According to the logic of substitution that structures this novel, Edison’s offer to replace the troublesome Alicia with an identical Andreid is an upgrade, not a radical break; he offers “illusion for illusion” (78), “chimera for chimera” (140), a more reliable, perfect, and controllable simulacrum of femininity than Alicia can ever achieve. In this iteration of the Pygmalion myth, Edison’s scientific potency replaces the animating breath of the gods, empowering Ewald to live out his fantasy of a hand-crafted stone bride. Hadaly, unlike Alicia, will fulfill her Galatean promise to be no more and no less than the lofty visions of her male creator.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. “I never knew a girl more a slave to style”: Leilah

In the tangle of loose threads that ties *L’Eve future* to *The Passion of New Eve*, Miss Alicia Clary has a counterpart in Leilah, the *femme fatale* figure who seduces Eve(lyn) (who

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<sup>18</sup> But even *L’Eve future* remains ambiguous about the extent to which Hadaly conforms to program, hinting at a mystical feminine pact between Sowana and Hadaly that exceeds the grasp of Edison’s science. And Ovid’s Pygmalion tale, told so briefly, leaves ample room for speculation about what kind of person the statue-woman turns out to be. Many transformative retellings of the myth envision resistant Galateas, including, to name just a few, Richard Powers’s novel *Galatea 2.2*, Carol Ann Duffy’s poem “Pygmalion’s Bride,” and Angela Carter’s short story “The Loves of Lady Purple.” Also falling into this category is the most famous modern Galatea, Eliza Doolittle of George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* and its musical adaptation *My Fair Lady*.

is, at this point, still happily male) in a peripatetic midnight striptease.<sup>19</sup> Leilah and Eve(lyn) spend several weeks together in a hash-fueled erotic haze, until he tires of her and she becomes pregnant; he gratefully abandons her, limp and bleeding, at the hospital after a complicated abortion. Like Alicia, Leilah emerges only within the overdetermining constraints of a male narrator; her character takes shape via Eve(lyn)'s unabashedly misogynist and racist discourse. Indeed, the entire Leilah episode could be read as an illustration of pre-operative Eve(lyn)'s masculine cruelty, forming a narrative justification for his subsequent surgical punishment. I choose instead to read Leilah, like Alicia, against the grain of the discourses that delineate her. Neither woman emerges readily as a figure of feminist resistance; both participate in and profit from conventional structures of objectification. Alicia sells her looks and her voice as a virtuoso; Leilah, as a nude dancer, submits herself even more blatantly as a commodity, an object of consumption for the male gaze.

Through Eve(lyn)'s gaze, Leilah emerges less as a living woman than as an archetype: she is "the profane essence of the death of cities, the beautiful garbage eater" (14), dwelling in the decaying ruins of Western civilization. Fatally seductive, sexually insatiable, she is also a figure of primitive, animalistic femininity, an exotic object for his consumption. The words on the page that constitute her are lush, sensuous, extravagant; Eve(lyn) describes her at great length and in fetishistic detail. But Leilah gets no words of her own; she interjects no dialogue into Eve(lyn)'s musings, and the few words she utters are mediated through his voice. Eve(lyn) holds a privileged monopoly over language throughout this novel—most obviously as the first-person

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<sup>19</sup> As Lathers notes in her comparative reading of Carter and Villiers, both Alicia and Leilah function as Lilith figures: each represents a failed version of womanhood who chronologically precedes a divinely constructed Eve ("*Fin-de-siècle* Eves 10). It is revealed late in Carter's novel that Leilah also goes by the name Lilith and is the surgeon Mother's daughter; as Lilith, she is an efficient, eloquent leader of a guerrilla resistance movement.

narrator, but also as a (originally) male scholar with a flair for the poetic. Nowhere does he exercise this rhetorical authority more strongly than when describing Leilah, who, to his sensitive ears, barely speaks language at all: “her argot or patois was infinitely strange to me, I could hardly understand a word she said” (22).<sup>20</sup> The sounds she makes are animal, not human: “sometimes she sounded more like a demented bird than a woman” (15), especially when she mounts him in his sleep, “twittering away... like a distracted canary” (23).

Built up by Eve(lyn) into an archetype, Leilah never gets the chance to be a person at all. In his mind, she is in every way his negative opposite: female, not male; American (and vaguely Third World), not British; black, not white; carnal, not intellectual; gibbering, not eloquent.<sup>21</sup> These symptoms of otherness in his lover all add up, in his narration, to a fundamental nonhumanity, even anti-humanity. Its most explicit mode is animality, enforced by the recurrent animal metaphors that describe her. In the initial striptease sequence, for instance, she is likened to a cat, a racehorse, a fox, a mermaid, a fish; she is “a strange, bird-like creature, plumed with furs, not a flying thing, nor a running thing, nor a creeping thing, not flesh nor fowl, some in-between thing” (17). Though she cannot be fixed to a taxonomic category, she is insistently

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<sup>20</sup> Here the novel echoes Lacanian theories of language and subjectivity: the woman’s speech is literally incomprehensible within the phallogocentric order in which Eve(lyn), as male intellectual, is fixed (Ledwon 27-28). Carter takes this Lacanian point to its extreme with the character of Zero, discussed below, who actively forbids his wives not only language, but their front teeth, and thus transforms the female mouth into a mute, harmless orifice of sexual pleasure.

<sup>21</sup> The relationship between Eve(lyn) and Leilah recalls Carter’s short story “Black Venus” (1985), another iteration of the white European dandy and his exotic fetish object. “Black Venus” narrates the troubled liaison between French poet Charles Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval, an actress of Haitian Creole descent. The story emphasizes the reductiveness of the pattern Baudelaire imposes on the black woman who functions for him as mistress and muse; it also speculates Duval’s point of view, giving voice to her own reasons for complying with his dehumanizing regime, and restoring her as a figure of ironic, vengeful agency. Nalo Hopkinson, in *The Salt Roads* (2003), continues down this path of feminist, postcolonial speculative fiction; one of the novel’s three intertwined narratives follows Duval over many years as she struggles against racism, poverty, and her lover’s possessive paternalism. Both “Black Venus” and *The Salt Roads* intervene in dominant historical accounts by making Duval the star of her own story, rather than a vague footnote in the life of a “great male artist.”

nonhuman, a “creature” or “thing” rather than a person.

As his assessment of her “demented” accented speech shows, Eve(lyn) readily conflates animality with racial otherness, describing Leilah’s blackness as a second aspect of her nonhumanity. He reads blackness as absolute negativity, divorcing it from any particular ethnicity or culture: “She was black as my shadow and I made her lie on her back and parted her legs like a doctor in order to examine more closely the exquisite negative of her sex” (23). Blackness makes her shadowy, insubstantial, an absence that contrasts with his solid, white, masculine presence: “her skin was matt, lustreless and far too soft, so that she seemed to melt in my embraces” (14-15). Animality and race also converge for Eve(lyn) as erotic signifiers; in his portrait of his lover as a primitive sex fiend, Eve(lyn) casually rehashes the well-worn racist and misogynistic stereotype of the Jezebel, the irrational and hypersexualized black woman.<sup>22</sup> Her insatiability evokes for him “the myth of the succubus” (23), marking her desire as demonically, dangerously other-than-human.

Eve(lyn)’s investment in this dehumanization of his lover is twofold. On the one hand, it feeds his desire for exotic otherness; in this sense, he attributes a certain irresistible power to her nonhumanity. Maggie Tonkin suggests that as a *femme fatale*, Leilah is a figure of resistance to masculine hegemony; knowingly objectified by Eve(lyn)’s desire, she uses the male gaze as a hook to reel him in (195). Indeed, in Eve(lyn)’s account, she actively seduces him, staging an elaborate and skillful erotic performance to lure him across the city to her bedroom; he is powerless to resist her charms. On the other hand, his desire, the force that grants her power over him, also turns against her, for his discourse of dehumanizing objectification is coupled with

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<sup>22</sup> David Pilgrim traces a history of the Jezebel stereotype, one of several persistent and dehumanizing tropes employed to represent black women in the white imaginary.

physical violence. Something in Leilah's nature—that is, in the archetypal nature that Eve(lyn) projects upon her—provokes and justifies his abuse: “she had something of the awful delicacy of those china ornaments that invite you to smash them, because they are so fragile” (26). It is difficult to piece together Leilah's own desires, since our narrator gives the topic little thought.<sup>23</sup> However, when Eve(lyn) offhandedly mentions the punishments he would inflict on her, his language tends to preclude the possibility of a mutually pleasurable sadomasochism. He often ties her to the bed and leaves her alone all day, coming home in the evening to find that, in keeping with the drugged, mindless passivity he attributes to her, “she had never made the least effort to free herself” (23). “She seemed to me a born victim and, if she submitted to the beatings and the degradations with a curious, ironic laugh that no longer tinkled—for I'd beaten the wind-bells out of her, I'd done *that* much—then isn't irony the victim's only weapon?” (24). Not only is she incapable of resistance, she is incapable of wanting to resist, her inscrutable laughter the only sign of her possible discontent.

It suits Eve(lyn)'s purpose to believe Leilah a “born victim,” for it relieves him of any responsibility for her suffering. The discourses he invokes to describe her combine to reinforce that belief: in the patriarchal tradition he upholds, women of any race, black people of any gender, and nonhuman animals are also born victims by default, subhumans whose bodies may be used and abused with impunity. Casting Leilah as a nonhuman other is his strategy for denying her a voice and justifying his violence and neglect toward her. But in describing a third mode of her inhumanity (besides animality and blackness), his narrative chokehold over her slips just enough

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<sup>23</sup> “What could she have seen in me?” he muses at one point. “She must have liked my tender pallor and my blue eyes and my English accent she found so hard to follow... God knows what else she could have liked, except the victim's role” (27). The question occurs only in retrospect, implying that Eve(lyn) never actually asked Leilah about her own desires in the weeks they spent together.



to hint at a more nuanced reading of her character. When Leilah dresses for work, assembling the lavish toilette of a stripper, she becomes a distinctly other being: no longer human nor animal, she is pure thing, an assemblage of glittery, seductive objects.

Applying the rouge to her nether lips and the purple or peony or scarlet grease to her mouth and nipples; powders and unguents all the colours of the rainbow went on to the skin in the sockets of her eyes; with the manual dexterity of an assembler of precision instruments, she glued on the fringe of false eyelashes. The topiary of her hair she would sometimes thread with beads or dust with glinting bronze powder she also applied to her pubic mound... Her dresses were rags of chiffon or of slimy, synthetic fabrics or harsh- textured, knitted, metallic stuff—gold and silver and copper. Her stockings were made of black, or purple, or scarlet mesh; her vertiginous shoes combinations of shiny leathers dyed green, pink, purple or orange. She walked in technicolor. (25)

In these moments of self-objectification, Leilah is no longer Eve(lyn)'s thing, but her own. The act of dressing for work is her sole realm of agency, the only place where Eve(lyn) recognizes a threat to his physical and discursive control over her. This form of agency is complex: like the women Baudelaire observes in "Le peintre de la vie moderne," Leilah is both artist and work. She dehumanizes herself, turning herself into an aesthetic object, even as she exerts creative authority. In this sense, Baudelaire proposes, the woman is a creative expert, and male artists look to her as a model to emulate. If Eve(lyn) could acknowledge this branch of his Baudelairean heritage, he might recognize Leilah as not his muse but his artistic predecessor: as the narrator of Leilah's self-construction in the passage above, he is merely representing what is already a fully-formed representation, translating a visual work of art into a poetic one.

Leilah's self-commodification aligns her firmly with the tradition of enforced female exhibitionism described by Laura Mulvey in relation to cinema, the conventions of which traditionally inscribe sexual difference in the form of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look." In his description of the make-up scene, Eve(lyn) casually invokes the scopophilic power

of the male gaze: “I used to adore to watch her dressing herself” (24). He lies idly on the bed, imagining her preparations as “an inversion of the ritual disrobing to which she would later submit her body” (26)—that is, as a spectacle staged for his own pleasure. Yet he also admits to losing his hold on Leilah in these moments; before his very eyes, she transforms into something other than his feral concubine. The effect of her elaborate maquillage is more than beautification: it is the meticulous construction of another self. “Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection” (24). When she is finished, she is thoroughly transformed: “My Leilah was now wholly the other one... the mirror bestowed a grace upon her, now she was her own mistress” (24). Eve(lyn) no longer possesses her: she may be a thing, a sexual commodity, but she trips off into the night independently to sell herself.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the slovenly insouciance with which Eve(lyn) generally characterizes his lover, Leilah’s toilette reveals her capacity for self-mastery; the other Leilah is an achievement over which she exerts total control. Eve(lyn) emphasizes the work put into her nightly self-objectification. He notes her ingenuity, precision, and conscious effort—“The finicking care she used to give to the creation of this edifice!” (25)—as he describes her make-up, hair, perfume, dresses, stockings, shoes, and furs in baroque, luxurious detail. Yet as he hints at a faint

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<sup>24</sup> Women are the primordial commodities, Luce Irigaray argues: “the society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women” (170), resulting in gender-based constraints on agency and mobility. “Commodities [i.e. women] can only enter into relationships under the watchful eyes of their ‘guardians.’ It is out of the question for them to go to ‘market’ on their own, enjoy their own worth among themselves, speak to each other, desire each other, free from the control of seller-buyer-consumer subjects” (Irigaray 196). Leilah does not refuse to go to market, like the women in Irigaray’s speculative utopia, but she does interject an agency that is disavowed within capitalist logic: this sexual object serves herself above all, profiting from her own exchange. Drawing on Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic traditions, Carla Freccero suggests that commodity fetishism, so crucial to capitalist operations, contains an anxiety about the subject/object divide and the ways it is made coextensive with sexual difference. “If the ideological fantasy consists in acting ‘as if’ commodities embody value and have worth, it is a fantasy that masks a desire to transform those commodities into proxy subjects who will ‘believe’ for their exchangers and the uneasy recognition that these commodities may indeed have a subjectivity and an agency of their own” (58).

admiration for his lover's capacity for self-authorship, he also denies the very possibility. Leilah as artist and architect does not square with the role of submissive savage into which his narrative has cast her. "I never knew a girl more a slave to style" (27), Eve(lyn) remarks, a statement that serves first to reduce the complexity and ingenuity of her self-making to a superficial, "girlish" obsession with fashion, and second to reinforce the role of racialized, gendered subjugation that, in his mind, she is born to play. He would prefer to think of his lover as a slave than an artist, and he would prefer that she be enslaved to his desire, rather than to her own aesthetic:

She did not want me to kiss her before she went out to work in case I smudge her lipstick or otherwise untidy her so, of course, so aroused was I by her ritual incarnation, the way she systematically carnalised herself and became dressed meat, that I always managed to have her somehow, at the last minute, even if it was up against the wall, while her lips stretched back to show her dark gums in an agony of affront and she gasped: "No!" (27)<sup>25</sup>

In the quotidian acts of rape that punctuate Leilah's routine, Eve(lyn) is aroused not by the woman herself, but by the thought of undoing the painstaking work she has done, of destroying her edifice. His narrative allows Leilah to flicker between two modes of nonhumanity, the animal and the aesthetic object; forcing her into sex before she goes to work is his way of enforcing the first mode—in which she is his object to consume, "dressed meat"—and wrecking the second—in which she is an object of her own making, to be used at her own pleasure.

But as Eve(lyn) admits, a relationship of one-sided domination eventually exhausts both parties. "Soon I grew bored with her. I had enough of her, then more than enough. She became only an irritation of the flesh, an itch that must be scratched; a response, not a pleasure" (27). In his narration as well as his behavior, he has dedicated himself to the project of emptying her out, turning her into a blank screen for his own projections. He has attempted to bridle her

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<sup>25</sup> This "no!" is Leilah's only word of quoted dialogue until she transforms into her alter ego Lilith.

creative forces and to make her into a being he can fully control—subhuman, passive, exploitable. When his desire has run its course, he sees nothing left in her. Thus Eve(lyn) joins Lord Ewald in a fraternity of men wronged by deceptively ideal women. Indeed, a slightly more introspective Ewald might, like Eve(lyn), admit that,

in my heart, I knew it was my own weakness, my own exhaustion that she had, in some sense, divined and reflected for me that had made her so attractive to me. She was a perfect woman; like the moon, she only gave reflected light. She had mimicked me, she had become the thing I wanted of her, so that she could make me love her and yet she had mimicked me so well she had also mimicked the fatal lack in me that meant I was not able to love her because I myself was so unlovable. (30)

The perfect woman is blank, constituted only as a reflection of male desire; yet perfection also requires that this empty vessel project an image of fullness. Neither Alicia nor Leilah, the self-made women, are deemed fit for the task. Each is judged derivative rather than original—as mimicking, rather than truly being, an ideal woman. Eve(lyn) voices that judgment by consigning Leilah to the realm of reflection, not production. Reflection, in his terms, indicates a lack of real substance; it can only be a shabby derivative of presence. Yet in the passage above, he seems to forget that it is through a mirror, through a reflection that becomes herself, that Leilah truly thrives. Iteration is her mode of being: self-copying augments, rather than erodes, the power of her presence.

In her seemingly automatic reiteration of the *femme fatale*, the hypersexualized object of the gaze, Leilah risks complying with oppressive notions of femininity as “hollow in itself, without substance,” a performance that “can only be sustained by its accoutrements, decorative veils, and inessential gestures” (Doane “Masquerade Reconsidered” 43). Her apparent fidelity to the patriarchal tradition of female passivity, availability, and incoherence, combined with her transformation, later in the novel, into the highly active, vigorous, and well-spoken alter ego

Lilith, might suggest that Leilah represents all that must be cast off for the survival of feminine being.<sup>26</sup> A reading aimed at the recuperation of Leilah's agency might therefore point to Lilith as the "real" woman and Leilah as "just an act." Yet this approach again reproduces the logic of real and false femininity, excluding one type of woman from the category of beings who matter. I argue instead that it is precisely as a spectacle, commodity, and masquerade that Leilah demonstrates her agency. She constructs herself through elaborate femme technologies, crafting an edifice of womanly splendor that mimics, but never quite fulfills, Eve(lyn)'s ideal woman. In Halberstam's terms, she is "automating gender," citing and reiterating tropes—not mindlessly, as the dupe of patriarchy, but in a mode of self-awareness and self-authorship, nightly creating herself anew. Leilah exemplifies Halberstam's notion of "gender as automated *and* intelligent, as a mechanism or structure capable of achieving some kind of autonomy from both biological sex and a rationalistic tradition" ("Automating" 456). Though her agency is disavowed both by Eve(lyn) and by the hegemonic discourses he so insistently invokes against his lover, Leilah points to the seductive yet unsettling power of the willfully artificial woman.

### 3. "*Ecce puella!*": Evelyn Habal

Dead by the time the events of the novel occur, Evelyn Habal is not, properly speaking, a character in *L'Eve future*. Yet in the narrative of feminine artifice that drives the two male protagonists to substitute Hadaly for Alicia, Evelyn's presence—that is, Edison's representation

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<sup>26</sup> This two-faced character, Britzolakis argues, also figures a larger problem of Carter's oeuvre. Sultry Leilah and warrior Lilith "represent the sundered halves of Carter's project—her baroque, eclectic appropriation of the Western cultural heritage and her commitment to demythologizing it in the cause of political transformation" (51)—two halves that, Britzolakis argues, Carter fails to productively resolve.

of her presence—is essential. Book IV, “Le Secret,” digresses from the main plotline of Ewald’s romantic troubles, yet constitutes, as Lathers argues, “the crucial narrative of the text” (“*Fin-de-siècle* Eves” 13). The figure of Evelyn serves as the linchpin for Edison’s entire discourse of feminine nonhumanity. Her villainy illustrates the inherent defectiveness of the entire female race, justifying Edison’s project to replace the female race with man-made Andreids.

In Book IV, Edison describes an episode from his past to explain the genesis of the Andreid project to the curious Ewald. He tells the tragic story of his friend Edward Anderson, a sensible, prosperous young gentleman seduced into ruin by a mistress of deception. Besotted with Evelyn Habal, a beautiful young dancer, Edward leaves his wife and children, wastes his fortune, and eventually, after Evelyn leaves him penniless, takes his own life. Hearing of his old friend’s dissolution at the hands of a pretty woman, Edison is suspicious: “J’en vins... à pressentir une si singulière différence entre ce que tous m’affirmaient de miss Evelyn Habal ET CE QU’ELLE DEVAIT ÊTRE EN RÉALITÉ” (“I finally sensed... a very singular difference between what people told me Miss Evelyn Habal was and what she *really* was”; 99; Rose 124). Turning his keen scientific eye toward an investigation of Miss Evelyn, Edison discovers the awful truth of her “beauty”: she is a completely artificial being, head to toe. Every aspect of her charming femininity is an illusion, carefully engineered to entrap a sensitive man like Edward.

To demonstrate his results to the skeptical Ewald, Edison lays out the material proof in three different representations of Evelyn. First he shows a film of her dancing: a graceful and ravishing young girl performing a lively song and dance.<sup>27</sup> A second film, however, reveals

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<sup>27</sup> *L’Eve future* provides a fascinating early assessment of cinema as new media; as Lathers points out, Villiers was remarkably prescient in his fiction, for the real-life Thomas Edison did indeed become a pioneer of cinema several years after the novel was published (*Aesthetics* 102). Lathers argues that the way Villiers imagines the structure of cinematic representation sets up a prototype that continues to dominate film to this day. Evelyn is imagined as a

the “real woman,” the wretched core lurking beneath the fetching exterior: the men gaze in dismay at “l'apparition d'un petit être exsangue, vaguement féminin, aux membres rabougris, aux joues creuses, à la bouche édentée et presque sans lèvres, au crâne à peu près chauve, aux yeux ternes et en vrille, aux paupières flasques, à la personne ridée, toute maigre et sombre. Et la voix avinée chantait un couplet obscène” (“the image of a vaguely feminine creature, bloodless, skinny, hollow-cheeked, with a nearly lipless, toothless mouth, a nearly bald skull, dull beetle eyes, drooping eyelids. Completely skinny, wrinkled, and lusterless. A drunken voice was heard singing an obscene song”; 107; Rose 135).<sup>28</sup> Yet Ewald, clinging to romantic notions of femininity, remains unconvinced that these could be the same woman until Edison lays out Evelyn Habal’s “*vrai ossements*” (“real remains”; 111; Rose 139)—that is, the array of cosmetics and costume that constitute her illusory being. In the section entitled “Exhumation,” Edison deconstructs the illusion piece by piece, flourishing each element of the toilette as a bitterly ironic illustration of the feminine ideal:

—Voici le teint de lis, les roses de la pudeur virginale, la séduction des lèvres mou-  
vantes, humides, pimentées de désirs, tout enflammées d'amour! Et il alignait, sur  
un bord circulaire de la muraille, de vieux étuis débouchés remplis d'un cosmétique  
rouge, des pots de gros fard de théâtre de toutes nuances, à moitié usés, des boîtes à  
mouches, etc...

—Voici les jambes, au modelé si pur, si délicieusement éperdues, de la ballerine!  
Et il faisait se trémousser, en les agitant à bras tendu le plus loin possible,—deux

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*femme fatale*, and is objectified, scrutinized, and put on trial; Edison embodies the sadistic voyeurism of the male gaze, judging her guilty and sentencing her to death. The woman is erased as a potential spectator; the reader, like Ewald, is coerced into sharing Edison’s objectifying point of view (*Aesthetics* 104-110). Furthermore, Edison fails to acknowledge how his own camera might endow Evelyn with a layer of artificiality, in addition to her own cosmetic feats; he treats his representations of her as self-evident truths. Carter’s novel, *Lathers* argues, supplies the missing discourse of cinematic artifice alongside feminine artifice (“*Fin-de-siècle Eves*” 15).

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Spackman identifies the enchantress-turned-hag as a significant topos in the Western cultural tradition. This topos resonates with ideologies of gender, opposing “the beautiful enchantress (woman as lie) to the ugly, toothless old hag hidden beneath her artifice (woman as truth)”; more generally, it also serves as “the hermeneutic figure par excellence, for it would reveal truth beneath falsehood, plain speech beneath cosmetic rhetoric, essence beneath appearance” (“*Inter musam*” 22). Woman’s truth, in this paradigm, is hideous and grotesque.

lourds et fétides maillots, sans doute jadis roses, aux tricots rembourrés d'une étoupe savamment répartie. (109-110)

“And here is the lily-white complexion, the roses of virginal modesty, the seduction of palpitating lips, moist, spiced with desire, enflamed with love!” And he aligned on a circular shelf of the wall old empty tubes of rouge, pots of heavy theatrical grease paint of every hue, all half used...

“And here are the ballerina’s legs, so pure a mold, so delectable in abandonment.” And, holding them as far away as possible, he began to flutter two heavy, foetid tights, probably once flesh-colored, with the jersey cunningly stuffed with oakum. (137)

In cataloging his artificial woman, Edison anticipates *Passion of New Eve*'s Eve(lyn) gazing at Leilah, but takes an entirely different approach. Leilah's assemblage of make-up and costume is fetishized by its narrator, bestowing a seductive magic and power upon the resulting woman. Evelyn Habal's assemblage, in contrast, is thoroughly disenchanted by its shrewdly rational narrator. Artifice gave her the power to ruin a man; the effect of Edison's demystifying exhumation is to strip the false “woman” of her power altogether. Edison's separation of illusion from reality also recalls Baudelaire, who writes in his “Eloge” that make-up transforms the female face into “une unité abstraite dans le grain et la couleur de la peau, laquelle unité, comme celle produite par le maillot, rapproche immédiatement l'être humain de la statue, c'est-à-dire d'un être divin et supérieur” (“an abstract unity in the colour and texture of the skin, a unity, which, like that produced by the tights of a dancer, immediately approximates the human being to the statue, that is to something superior and divine”; 24; Mayne 33). But for Edison, the illusion is not a performance to be applauded but a travesty to be detested. The face powder and the dancer's tights that Baudelaire appreciates as tools of the trade are here singled out for ridicule and disgust, along with her hair, skin, facial features, teeth, breasts, hips, legs, nails, feet, smile, and aroma—the entire façade of her femininity. Separated from the whole, and subject to Edison's scientific gaze,



each former charm is laid bare as monstrous, false, and unnatural.<sup>29</sup>

In a novel infamous for its fundamental mistrust of women, the Evelyn Habal episode prompts Edison to voice the most extreme, rancorous, and unabashed misogyny of all. Edison's characteristic persona of the level-headed, quirky yet rational scientist slips; describing Evelyn Habal, he shifts to a register of bitter vitriol. There is nothing subtle about his declaration that women are not human beings, an argument he builds from two contradictory parts. On the one hand, Edison claims, women are animals, devoid of (hu)mankind's higher intellectual impulses. Their capacity to deceive and seduce is not a skill but an innate instinct, like the bee's instinct to build a hive: "Ces sortes d'êtres ne savent que cela, ne peuvent que cela, ne comprennent que cela. Ils sont étrangers à tout le reste,--qui ne les intéresse pas. C'est de la pure animalité" ("This is all that type of creature knows, all she can do, all she understands. Everything else is alien to her. Nothing else interests her. It's a case of pure animality"; 100; Rose 126).<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, women are objects, or collections of objects, rather than coherent human beings. Displaying Evelyn's "remains," Edison insists that these greasy, tattered things are equivalent to the woman herself—artifice is her mode of existing in the world. Without deception, she is nothing, defined by negativity—the bloodless, lipless, toothless, lusterless specter reeling about the screen in

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<sup>29</sup> In "Ideological Fantasies," Freccero describes two texts (one ancient Greek, one early modern Italian) that participate in a "diatribe against cosmetics" in a mode that signals the emergence of capitalist logics of exchange in the family structure. The first text, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, equates female make-up to "false advertising," a form of deception that might fool a stranger, but not a husband (55); this logic is echoed in Edison's condemnation of Evelyn Habal. The second text, Alberti's *Della famiglia*, compares a wife to an exquisite statue; her husband cautions her not to "besmirch" herself with make-up, lest she decrease her value. In this text, Freccero notes, "while the labor of the 'artist' produces a thing of value, the labor of the woman devalues it, even as her labor of 'self-commodification' . . . devalues the worth of her own body by 'de-naturing' it" (57)—a logic that is echoed in Ewald's condemnation of Alicia. Freccero's analysis illustrates the long, embedded tradition of commodifying women and the accompanying ambivalence about the agency and subjectivity of human (female) commodities.

<sup>30</sup> Hustvedt places Edison's judgment in the context of late nineteenth-century medical discourse, referring particularly to eminent scientist Cesare Lombroso's theories of feminine degeneracy. The representation of Evelyn reads like one of Lombroso's case studies, particularly in the detail that her degenerate nature is inscribed upon her body—under her false exterior, she is visibly grotesque (33).

Edison's second film. Paradoxically, Edison says, women are by nature depraved, even as they employ decidedly unnatural technologies of deception; in this sense they are both animals and machines, doubly untrustworthy. For Edison, they embody everything that is grotesquely other to mankind; they occupy the wrong two points of what Dominic Pettman calls "the cybernetic triangle," the discursive scaffolding built to separate humans from animals and machines (*Human Error* 5).<sup>31</sup>

In this articulation of women's double nonhumanity, Edison clearly lays out the linkages between femininity, animality, and objecthood that are so crucial to this dissertation. But instead of affirming these positions of difference from the norm, he asserts the extreme patriarchal point of view. By defining women as animal-objects, he proclaims them deserving subjects of masculine authority and violence:

Or, comme il est dans la nature de ces sortes de personnes aussi nulles que mortelles *d'en abuser quand même! nécessairement!* ... je conclus que le droit, libre et naturel aussi, de cet homme sur elles--si, par miracle, il lui est donné de s'apercevoir à temps de *ce* dont il est victime--est la mort sommaire, adressée de la manière la plus occulte et la plus sûre, et cela sans scrupule ni autre forme de procès, par la raison qu'on ne discute pas plus avec le vampire qu'avec la vipère. (102)

Now it is the nature of such a female, a fatal nonentity really, to take advantage on principle! by necessity! ... Therefore, I depose that such a man's free and natural right over them—if miraculously he is able to realize in time that he is being victimized—is summary death, carried out as surreptitiously and securely as possible without scruple, with no trial whatsoever, for the simple reason that you do not have to debate with a vampire or a viper. (128-129)

This rhetoric is rife with contradictions, all resolved in favor of the male "victim." The fraudulent woman operates by blind instinct, without agency; deception is her essential nature, not a choice.

At the same time, all responsibility for gentlemanly downfall lies with her, not with the man

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<sup>31</sup> The counterpart to womankind in the vegetable world, Edison asserts, is the Upas tree: an ugly poisonous plant that attracts millions of caterpillars in order to present an illusion of shimmering beauty. The Upas figures nature's deceptive, deadly potential; like animals and women, its technology of artifice is mindlessly, mechanically deployed.

himself. Edison literally argues that men have the right to murder women, yet frames that argument as a desperate plea to save male lives (over fifty thousand men are destroyed annually by women like Evelyn Habal, by Edison's estimation!). Finally, the contradiction at the crux of this novel is Edison's absolute distinction between masculine and feminine creation. A woman like Evelyn who builds herself out of artificial parts is a monster, an animal, a lifeless collection of objects animated only by evil; a man like Edison who builds a woman out of artificial parts is a benevolent and genius inventor.

This Decadent incarnation of Thomas Edison embraces (and heightens) the misogyny of Baudelaire's discourse on feminine artifice, while excising any hint of admiration for female self-authorship.<sup>32</sup> Evelyn Habal is not an artist; the feminine toilette is not an aesthetic or technological achievement; artifice in the hands of women yields fatal deception. In stark contrast, Edison is an artist; Hadaly is both a work of art and a technological masterpiece; artifice in the hands of men yields a brave new world. Edison fantasizes about a world in which women, artificial beings to their core, can be upgraded: self-authored living women will be eliminated, replaced by male-engineered Andreids, who will prove both more amenable and more authentic versions of feminine artifice. This substitution is simply a matter of practicality: since women are essentially fake, they are basically incomplete, primitive Andreids already. So, "chimère pour chimère, pourquoi pas l'Andréïde elle-même?... Essayons de changer de mensonge! Ce sera plus commode pour elles et pour nous" ("chimera for chimera, why not use the Andreid

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<sup>32</sup> Garelick suggests that the continuity between male and female artistry is what makes women dangerous: Edison's loathing for Evelyn is due to his unacknowledged fear of being outshone by her. "It is precisely this point of resemblance between Evelyn and Edison, their wizardry, that is so menacing to the latter. The myriad electrical gadgets and orientalist bibelots surrounding Edison in his laboratory are the masculinized, scientific counterparts to Evelyn's accumulated objects of parure" (88).

herself?... Let's substitute different deception. It will be better for all of us"; 112-113; Rose 140). Good chimera for bad; masculine technicity for feminine; professional skill for dilettantism; intelligence for instinct; programmability for unpredictability—in essence, Edison proposes substituting a real fake for a fake fake. It is Hadaly, not Evelyn Habal, who will “pass” as authentically female under the scrutiny of the patriarchal gaze.

Edison's proposal to replace unscrupulous women like Alicia and Evelyn with the reliably perfect Andreid points toward a set of aesthetic and cultural controversies that concerned Villiers, his fellow Decadent writers, and the *fin de siècle* period in general. As Europe in the 1880s and 1890s confronts cultural industrialization (including the rise of cinema), technologies of mass production, and the threatened decay of high culture, the decadent dandy, Garelick observes, serves as a figure of resistance to modernity; he embodies nobility, elitism, and singularity against the encroaching tide of mass culture and economic exchangeability (Garelick 5). *L'Eve future* addresses these questions of cultural and aesthetic change with Villiers's characteristic ambivalence. On the one hand, Lord Ewald embodies standard qualities of the Decadent dandy: he is wealthy, noble, and offended by bourgeois modernity, and he looks backward, not forward, for his standards of aesthetic perfection.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the character of Edison makes the text's relationship to modernity much more complex. Villiers's Edison is simultaneously aligned with Ewald's regressive, elitist tradition and emblematic of a tide of cultural change that will wash that tradition away. The American scientist and inventor is a figure of technological

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Martin Adams, introducing his own English translation of *L'Eve future*, suggests a strong identification between the author, a poet with his head in the clouds, and Ewald, his noble and romantic protagonist. Adams even points to an episode in Villiers's life when his overzealous recitation of poetry fails to woo a wealthy young lady. “What remained in Villiers' mind was the spiritless, blockish female who had been utterly incapable of responding to this romantic declarations, had not even glimpsed the world of his ideal values” (xii)—a situation that parallels Ewald's despair over Alicia.

advancement, progressive thinking, and futurity, a menacing contrast to the ancient European aristocracy so prized by his troubled young friend. The new world, democratized, networked, and commodified by technologies of mass media, industrial production, and telecommunication—due in no small part to the efforts of real-life Thomas Edison—is a place where the Decadent dandy finds himself obsolete.

Edison's invention of the Andreid replicates this extreme ambivalence, for even the inventor cannot quite decide what kind of aesthetic object she will be. From one point of view, Hadaly is a decadent's dream *objet d'art*: she is the only one of her kind, constructed by a master craftsman, and custom-made for a man specifically deemed worthy of ownership. But she is also a product of modern technology and thus infinitely reproducible. Indeed, that is Edison's original plan: he anticipates his formula being picked up by a resourceful industrialist who will manufacture thousands of ideal women to save the lives of thousands of men in need. At the novel's end, Edison promises his friend he will manufacture no more Andreids, thus safeguarding—but only circumstantially—the unique status of Ewald's new possession. His choice not to reproduce her does not change her fundamental reproducibility.

*L'Eve future* thus dramatizes the cultural shift outlined by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The techniques of modernity that render an artwork reproducible and transmissible have the effect of eroding its aura, its singular uniqueness and inaccessibility. The notion of authenticity depends on preserving a distance between a work and its audience; as art becomes more available to the masses, there is a corresponding loss of aura and authenticity. But while Benjamin celebrates the egalitarian potential of modern aesthetic technologies, Edison cannot make up his mind about the value of

mechanical reproducibility. To be good enough for his blue-blooded friend, Hadaly must stay singular and retain her aura; to fulfill her promise as a mass-market miracle product, she must be replicated, her aura withering away.

This concern with the aura echoes the question of authenticity that runs throughout this chapter. A fatal lack of aura marks Evelyn Habal and Alicia as inauthentic, artificial women. To the distaste of Ewald and Edison, both women—Alicia the virtuoso, Evelyn the cabaret dancer—are enthusiastic participants in a new kind of culture, characterized by mass popularity and industrial reproduction rather than solitary contemplation and authentic singularity. They are entertainers, rather than artists; their work is imitative, not original. Both women are associated with the technologies of mechanical reproduction: Alicia distributes photographs of herself to possible employers and admirers, while Evelyn is captured on film by Edison. But more important than the fact that they are reproduced is the understanding that the women themselves are fundamentally, infinitely reproducible—and thus, chillingly, disposable. Because they are made out of artificial parts, because they are mere simulations of the feminine ideal, they can be replaced, “chimera for chimera” (Rose 140).<sup>34</sup> Their replacement is an Andreid, a product of modern machinery that promises a return to an older model of aesthetic contemplation and possession: paradoxically, Edison hopes, technology in the hands of a genius can restore the aura that technology in general has destroyed. Yet as Garelick points out, “a creature such as Hadaly could not exist in the Old World as the plaything of a single aristocrat; she contains within her

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<sup>34</sup> This logic of feminine substitution also structures the 1975 U.S. American horror film *The Stepford Wives*. In the tradition of *L’Eve future*, the film suggests that men might be easily seduced into the fantasy of total control over the women in their lives, especially in moments of social change when traditional gender roles seem to loosen their hold—the Stepford robo-wives embody a return to the feminine ideal of submissive domesticity that feminists of the 1960s-70s sought to overturn.

too much of the modern machine age, the era of the crowd” (97). Even the “authentic” fake, Edison’s singular *objet d’art*, could become just another mass-produced commodity, another simulation of womanhood, a possibility that threatens both Edison’s status as author and Ewald’s status as possessor of a rare masterpiece. But it is Tristessa, Carter’s celluloid celebrity, for whom simulation equals existence, who bears the full weight of these potentially deadly questions of authenticity, reproducibility, and disposability.

#### **4. “The perfect man’s woman”: Tristessa de St Ange**

In this pantheon of constructed women, *The Passion of New Eve*’s Tristessa stands out as the greatest triumph (or, depending on one’s perspective, the biggest failure) of feminine self-authorship. Tristessa is a legendary starlet of Old Hollywood whose repertoire consists of an endless list of tragically glamorous heroines. “Suffering was her vocation” (4); she dies a succession of exquisite onscreen deaths to the delight of thousands before her particular brand of poignant femininity goes out of style in the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> For Eve(lyn), who was a fervent fan in his youth, she retains at first only a nostalgic appeal. But the specter of Tristessa haunts every step of Eve(lyn)’s American odyssey. As New York descends into pandemonium, her films play on late-night television; as the New Eve convalesces post-surgery, the same films form the centerpiece of an enforced crash course in femininity. Finally, the woman herself makes a brief appearance on the scene, long enough for Eve(lyn) to fall in love, marry, and have sex with her, before Tristessa is shot to death by a band of crusading teenage soldiers and the grieving Eve(lyn)

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<sup>35</sup> In keeping with the tenor of her career, Tristessa’s name evokes the French *tristesse* and Spanish *tristeza*, sadness.

must continue her adventures alone.

Like Evelyn Habal in *L'Eve future*, Tristessa makes a career out of “passing” as a woman: both are master technicians of femininity, carefully constructing their artificial selves. And like Evelyn, she is eventually “outed” in a violent, humiliating manner by a hostile patriarchal figure. The difference between these two “false women” is that Tristessa is transgender, a woman assigned male at birth; her feminine becoming goes even further than Evelyn Habal’s, crossing the boundaries of medically and socially enforced gender. In this comparison of New Eve texts, Tristessa’s gender identity constitutes one of Carter’s major interventions into Villiers’s narrative of artificial femininity. The object of suspicious scrutiny is transformed: Evelyn Habal, the ugly hag in disguise, is reworked as Tristessa, the woman with a penis.

What does Carter accomplish with such a twist? For many critics, the answer is simple: Tristessa, a so-called “man pretending to be a woman,” reveals the patriarchal foundations of cultural ideals of femininity. The unmasking of this icon of dolorous womanhood is understood as an act of feminist demythologization. For Christina Britzolakis, its explicitness ties the novel unmistakably to the specific cultural milieu of the late 1970s, when demythologizing was an exciting project; Tristessa the “transvestite” (50) reveals the illusory nature of the femininity she represents.<sup>36</sup> Merja Makinen similarly argues that Tristessa’s function is to demonstrate that “passive femininity is nothing but a male creation” (157), while Joanna Trevenna interprets Tristessa’s “impersonation of a woman” as the projection of a desirous “latent male subjectivity”

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<sup>36</sup> In current gender discourse, “transvestite” rings somewhat archaic and even hostile, for reasons that I think Tristessa’s case makes clear. I highlight the term not to accuse Britzolakis of insensitivity but to illustrate the necessity for the more extensive terminology of gender diversity in use among both popular and scholarly discourses of feminism, gender, and sexuality. To call Tristessa a transvestite reduces her femininity to clothing choices, or to a sexual fetish, rather than taking it seriously as a gender identity.



(273). In the same vein, and with a comparative gesture, Lathers reads Tristessa as an indication that “media portrayals of gender, from that of Evelyn Habal to Tristessa’s version of Emma Bovary [one of her many starring roles], are effects of pure mystification” (“*Fin-de-siècle* Eves” 17). The tendency to read Tristessa’s “outing” as demystification implies that transgender womanhood represents a mystification—a deliberate project, undertaken from a masculine position of privilege, to appropriate femininity from actual women, to construct an image of feminine beauty that is culturally pervasive, impossible to attain, and harmful in its effects.

The problem, however, is that such a reading coincides with the worst tenets of transphobic discourse. It insists that Tristessa is really a man, not the woman she claims to be; that her gender expression is an act of deception and appropriation, not a legitimate identification. Reading a trans woman as a “man pretending to be a woman” is a tactic common to a range of cultural and political positions; there are countless and contradictory rationales offered for policing the boundaries of binary gender, and transphobia is one site where something called feminism veers bafflingly close to patriarchal tradition. On the one hand, Janice Raymond, speaking as a feminist critic in her 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*, declares that “all transsexuals rape women’s bodies.”<sup>37</sup> This particularly extreme invocation reflects long-standing and continued difficulties between second-wave-era feminism and queer/transgender/genderqueer activism.<sup>38</sup> From this

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond’s charge provokes Sandy Stone to write “*The Empire Strikes Back*,” an essay often regarded as a founding text of the field of transgender studies.

<sup>38</sup> This statement is, of course, a broad generalization—neither second-wave feminism nor queer/transgender activism is a monolithic entity—but one with some historical and cultural weight. “Transfeminism and the Future of Gender,” Chapter 4 of Gayle Salamon’s *Assuming a Body*, provides a nuanced critical overview of this history. Salamon argues for a more mutually receptive relationship between women’s studies (which must become more responsive to emerging gender diversity) and trans studies (which benefits from feminism’s critique of individualist subjectivity). As I write in 2014, I am reminded of the continued relevance of the confrontation I describe here. The increased visibility of transgender women activists and theorists has been met with hostile and even violent backlash from certain branches of radical feminism (designated by trans activists as TERF, trans-exclusionary radical feminism) who accuse trans women of exercising male privilege and upholding patriarchy. The so-called TERF wars

marginal perspective, trans women are intolerable because they steal and deform something that properly belongs to women—they are perverted colonizers of femininity. On the other hand, the “exposure” narrative is also enthusiastically employed by patriarchal culture writ large—by the mainstream media, police, legal system, popular culture, and the many individuals who commit physical, emotional, and verbal violence against women they determine to be “really men.”<sup>39</sup> From this dominant perspective, trans women are intolerable because their failure to fit passably into normal gender categories renders them something other (that is, less) than human beings.

In many ways, *Passion of New Eve* seems to encourage the reading of trans womanhood as deception. The discovery of Tristessa’s gender history is staged as a “big reveal,” a secret around which the novel dances tantalizingly from its opening pages. Eve(lyn)’s narration frequently expounds upon Tristessa in terms of a real (male) interior and a false (female) exterior. Her gender identity is associated with illusion and emptiness; lacking the substance of truth, she is perceived as nearly nonexistent. “All you signified was false! Your existence was only notional; you were a piece of pure mystification” (2), Eve(lyn) cries; later, she explains that “Tristessa had no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status, only an iconographic one” (126). The switch to masculine pronouns, though not completely consistent, occurs after Tristessa is outed. Eve(lyn), though she muses that “He, she—neither will do for you, Tristessa” (140), tends to refer to her as male—that is, to misgender her—once she has been stripped of her

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are playing out in the mainstream press as well as on countless blogs, Internet forums and message boards. For one entry point into the current discursive conflict, see Michelle Goldberg’s *New Yorker* piece “What is a Woman?: the dispute between radical feminism and transgenderism” and Julia Serano’s “An Open Letter to the *New Yorker*,” which critiques Goldberg’s sympathetic portrayal of trans-exclusionary feminism.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, “trans panic” is a legal defense that has been employed in cases relating to the assault or murder of trans women. Defendants (typically cisgender males) use it to argue for a lesser charge, claiming that the shocking revelation of their victim as transgender provoked uncontrollable violence. In 2014, California became the first and only U.S. state to ban the trans panic defense (and the related gay panic defense) in murder trials.

feminine accoutrements. The use of masculine pronouns brazenly contradicts the gender Tristessa has spent years constructing; for Eve(lyn), it functions as an assertion of authorial privilege, a significant editorial decision made by the one telling the story in flagrant contradiction of her source.<sup>40</sup>

Worse than the deliberate misuse of pronouns, however, is Eve(lyn)'s personal theory of the motivation for Tristessa's "deception." The narrator, an unabashed-cad-turned-female-victim, attributes a perverse misogyny to the transgender woman, echoing the anti-trans feminism outlined above. "How much he must have both loved and hated women, to let Tristessa be so beautiful and make her suffer so!" (141), Eve(lyn) muses. From her perspective, trans femininity is not an authentic identity but a twisted fetish of male heterosexuality: "*That* was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved!" (125).<sup>41</sup> This concept of trans womanhood equates it to an act of hostility against so-called "real" women. Armed with new information about Tristessa's gender history, Eve(lyn) reinterprets the film star's oeuvre as an insidious universal tutorial:

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<sup>40</sup> Misgendering (a term coined by Serano in *Whipping Girl*) describes an extensive range of acts and practices by which trans people are assigned a gender other than the one with which they identify. Whether deployed out of hostility or carelessness, misgendering functions to deny the legitimacy of trans gender identity. In this case, Eve(lyn)'s vacillation ignores the fact that the pronoun "she" has, indeed, served Tristessa well for decades.

<sup>41</sup> The interpretation of trans femininity as a male fetish is a medical and cultural trope with significant weight. Both Serano and Stone outline the prevalence of "gatekeepers" in the clinical history of transgender identity: throughout the twentieth century, the medical professionals who held the power to recognize and treat gender dissonance tended to rely on gender-normative and heteronormative standards for determining "true" transsexuals. In the 1980s, for instance, psychologist Ray Blanchard proposed a model that sorted transsexual female patients into two categories: "homosexual" transsexuals (sexually aroused by men) versus "autogynephilic" transsexuals (sexually aroused by the thought of themselves as women) (*Whipping Girl* 265-269). Neither category recognizes trans women as women, but "autogynephilic" transsexuality is specifically defined as a male fetish, understood as a sexually deviant desire. In this and other dominant narratives that have had concrete consequences for trans people trying to confirm their gender medically, identifying with femininity and desiring femininity are posited as mutually exclusive. Yet as Serano points out, having a fetishistic relationship to one's own body is part of the normal experience of desire for many people, both cis- and transgender (268-269); and as Teresa de Lauretis and other psychoanalytic theorists note, fetishism need not be tied either to pathology or to male subjectivity (*Figures*). The trope of trans femininity as a male fetish thus forecloses numerous possibilities of gender, identity, and desire.

“suffering and melancholy, said Tristessa, that is a woman’s life” (107)—a malicious lesson coming from someone who is “really a man.” With this line of thinking, Eve(lyn) casts Tristessa as an undercover agent in the war between the sexes, deliberately promoting an unachievable ideal of womanhood: “Tristessa, the sensuous fabrication of the mythology of the flea-pits. How could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you?” (125).

Eve(lyn)’s assessment of Tristessa thus echoes the classic dismissal of transgender womanhood perpetuated by exclusionary feminists as well as the misogynist mainstream. In a strange twist, the transphobia that constrains the narration of *New Eve* is voiced by another trans woman—ironically, one who is actually guilty of the charges she aims at Tristessa. With the character of Eve(lyn), transformed into a woman quasi-magically and against her will, Carter contrives a “straw transsexual”: a woman who really, truly was a man before transition, one who embodied male privilege and abused women with impunity. It is Eve(lyn), not Tristessa, who is aroused by her first post-operative encounter with a mirror, seeing her female body as an other to be ogled rather than a self to live with: “I had become my own masturbatory fantasy... The cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (71). The trans woman with a “cock in her head,” the man who puts on a dress or surgically reshapes his body in order to occupy women’s spaces, the transsexual as sexual predator in disguise: these tropes are not only inaccurate representations of trans people, but transphobic fantasies that deny the possibility of trans womanhood altogether.<sup>42</sup>

Carter’s choice to center her story on such a “straw transsexual” thus poses severe

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, in the United States, a number of so-called “bathroom bills” proposed in recent years would make it illegal for trans people to use public bathrooms not in accordance with their sex assigned at birth. Rhetoric in support of these bills often invokes the need to protect women and girls from sexual predators—that is, trans womanhood is assumed to be a male ruse to gain access to “real” women’s bodies.

challenges to a transfeminist reading. Eve(lyn) gets the privilege of first-person narration; the novel is so closely tied to her perspective that it may appear inevitable to attribute her judgment of trans identity to the text itself. As Rachel Carroll points out, critics of the novel tend to leave Eve(lyn)'s anti-trans sentiments unchallenged, and to reproduce them in their own arguments (248). Yet Eve(lyn)'s history of virulent misogyny, manifested spectacularly toward Leilah, is evidence enough for a critical distance between Carter's text and its narrator. Reassignment as a woman does not magically turn Eve(lyn) into a feminist or a gender diversity advocate; although she becomes more sensitive to the plight of women in a patriarchal society, she fails to include Tristessa in that category. One could read that failure as Carter's own and therefore condemn this novel to the (necessarily very large) dustbin of transmisogynist culture. Or, more generously, one could read Eve(lyn)'s transphobia as a narrative and political problem, a way for the novel to work through and even challenge exclusionary, essentialist aspects of the second-wave feminist discourses that inform Carter's oeuvre. Attending to the character of Tristessa, the self-authored trans woman, guides my reading toward that second path, and helps articulate the novel's critique of its own narrator, the ungenerous "straw transsexual." Though it necessarily lacks the vocabulary and critical framework of more recent developments in (trans)gender studies, *New Eve* still manages to offer a more complicated and open theory of gender than the limited, binary-driven perspective of its narrator.

Tristessa's story shows, for instance, how the text supplies the means to deconstruct its own anti-trans discourse. The implicit textual violence of Eve(lyn)'s persistent misunderstanding of trans womanhood is literalized in the explicit physical violence inflicted on Tristessa in the moment of "outing," when her carefully composed femininity is blown open with astounding

cruelty. Zero, the crazed phallocrat who keeps eight wives, including Eve(lyn), as servile beasts on his desert ranch, is hell-bent on revenge against Tristessa, the film star whom he believes to be the source of his infertility.<sup>43</sup> When he locates her mansion tucked away in the mountains, he seizes the opportunity to enact violent retribution. Zero whips Tristessa and strips her bare; at the revelation of her penis, he is initially shocked, but quickly recognizes Tristessa's secret as yet another reason to mock, humiliate and attack her. What follows is a derisive spectacle that echoes Edison's scathing exhibition of Evelyn Habal, as Zero orchestrates an irreverent and ironic display of every aspect of Tristessa's feminine artifice. His wives ransack the mansion, digging up Tristessa's diet powders and pills, medical and recreational drugs, cosmetics, perfumes, and a sumptuous wardrobe representing "forty years of travesty" (127). Finally, in a ceremony of dizzying genderbending, Zero orders Eve(lyn), outfitted in the "double drag" (129) of a suit and tie, to play the groom to Tristessa's bride; after marrying the two, Zero forces them to have sex while he and his wives watch, then brutally rapes Eve(lyn) to conclude the scene.

Rape is Zero's preferred mode of interaction with women—indeed, his only mode, since he forbids his wives the privilege of language. Eve(lyn)'s tenure as Zero's wife amounts to a series of rapes that she likens to a military assault: "he entered me like the vandals attacking Rome" (88), she recalls, describing Zero's rapes as a perpetual violation both of her body and her essential self. In the marriage scene, Zero targets both Eve(lyn) and Tristessa; both are sexually assaulted and forced to undergo a painful, humiliating spectacle. The violence inflicted on Tristessa is thus part and parcel of Zero's overall contempt toward and subjugation of women.

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<sup>43</sup> In Carter's working notes for *New Eve* from 1972-73 (Notepad 1973), this character is named Manson, a clear reference to American cult leader Charles Manson who, like Zero, headed a reclusive communal "family" in the California desert. Manson was convicted in 1971 of conspiracy to murder seven people. Thus while Zero's character is in many ways an absurd caricature of patriarchy, he is also linked to a real-world patriarchal leader.

But Tristessa's rape, enacted by proxy rather than by Zero's own body, also takes a specifically transmisogynistic form: she is forced to penetrate Eve(lyn) and thus to play a role understood by her attacker as male.<sup>44</sup> As Carroll points out, Tristessa's outing has "a punitive, corrective function: namely, to forcibly inscribe... both a biological maleness and a male heterosexuality" (249)—that is, to overwrite Tristessa's own version of herself. The edifice of her femininity is ridiculed and dismantled; her penis, unconcealed and forced to perform a sex act understood to be heterosexual, is interpreted, by Zero as well as Eve(lyn), as proof of an essential maleness. Although the act is performed under duress, it is a highly erotic experience for Eve(lyn), who feels only desire for her partner's unwilling erection and orgasm. For both Zero and Eve(lyn), then, Tristessa's rape "reveals the 'truth' of sex: namely, that Tristessa cannot be permitted to be a woman" (Carroll 251); the penis is treated as a privileged signifier, overshadowing all of its possessor's claims to a feminine identity.<sup>45</sup>

When Eve(lyn) clings to the narrative of trans womanhood as deception, she seems unable to recognize the lineage between her own discursive and Zero's material violence against Tristessa. Neither Eve(lyn) nor Zero will allow Tristessa to be the woman she feels herself to be; one uses the power of authorship to overwrite Tristessa's identity, the other uses physical force

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<sup>44</sup> The different forms of sexual violence enacted in this scene illustrate the convoluted nature of Zero's sexual taboos. He has long denounced Tristessa for being a "dyke"; when he finds her and discovers the body he perceives as male, he does not rape her (perhaps because the act would read as homosexual to him), but forces Eve(lyn) to do so "heterosexually." He then anally rapes Eve(lyn), again a "heterosexual" act but one that evokes homosexual sex.

<sup>45</sup> Eve(lyn) and Tristessa later have consensual sex, after the initial rape. The sexual relationship between two trans women with complex histories of identity and desire registers a queer transgression of binary sex and gender norms. But both Zero and Eve(lyn) choose to read the act as heterosexual and deny its queerness: Zero because he does not know that his wife has ever been anything other than a woman, Eve(lyn) because she does not consider that Tristessa's femininity might be flexible enough to accommodate a penis, or that a trans woman might be attracted to women. Johnson and Carroll each discuss the queer possibilities of this coupling, and the ways those possibilities are foreclosed in the text. "An insistence on binary categories," Carroll remarks, "serves to contain Eve and Tristessa's queer union within heteronormative terms" (252)—perhaps because Carter's work, as a whole, is largely concerned with exploring the possibilities and limitations of heterosexuality in the context of sexual inequality, and less interested in alternatives to it.

to destroy it. The unacknowledged alignment between these two characters renders Eve(lyn)'s gender policing suspect, opening up space in the text for more nuanced and diverse possibilities of gender expression. Ironically, it is Zero, the embodiment of patriarchal discourse to its absurd extreme, who makes patently clear the continuity between cis and trans women, since neither registers to him as human. Eve(lyn), Tristessa, and Zero's hapless wives all come to femininity in different ways. Womanhood is not a choice for any of them, but a necessary condition of being themselves. The figure of Eve(lyn), the unwilling transsexual, caricatures the involuntariness of gender, but her cisgender fellow wives are marked by a more mundane lack of agency: victims of neglect and abuse, they are "case histories, rather than women" (96), inheritors of womanhood and its many hazards. Even Tristessa, whose womanhood is interpreted by Eve(lyn) as a (malicious) choice, demonstrates the strange mixture of agency and compulsion that produces gender identity. Like all the self-made women featured in this chapter, she exerts some degree of artistic control over the crafting of her femininity, but the basic condition of being a woman is a necessary foundation for the formation of her subjectivity; in Butler's terms, her gender is performative, but not a willful performance. Regardless of how these different women come into femininity, Zero makes them all suffer for it; he reduces them all to objects for his own sexual, economic, and recreational gratification. The idea that Tristessa is "really a man," that she is posing as a woman while still enjoying the privileges of masculinity, cracks under the impact of transmisogynist violence. Zero, patriarchy personified, reveals that womanhood is less about genitalia than about subjugation, a feminized and dehumanized position rather than a stable and essential identity.

Reading the outing of Tristessa alongside the outing of Evelyn Habal in *L'Eve future* is a way to move beyond the "demystification" interpretation of Carter's novel. Ironically, the figure



of Evelyn Habal, dreamed up long before the modern concept of “transgender” came onto the scene, helps move Carter’s transgender character out of an essentialist feminist framework, limited by its reliance on a foundational gender binary, and towards a more radical and inclusive landscape of gender theory. What stands out between the two women is not the single obvious difference between them (one cisgender, one trans) but the many similarities. Both put in significant work to construct their feminine selves; both make a living from successful performances of femininity; both are forced to confront relentless, violent classifications of real versus fake; both are subjected to humiliating operations of outing and condemned for their perceived inauthenticity. These two feminine creatures, despite the intricate artistry of their performances, are not allowed to pass as “real women.” As Edison demonstrates, a cisgender woman can also be forcibly outed: being born with female genitalia does not save Evelyn Habal from the dehumanizing violence of exposure. At the same time, being born with genitalia assigned male does not make Tristessa any more deserving of that fate.

To read Evelyn Habal and Tristessa as counterparts means that it no longer makes sense to accuse Tristessa of deception. The affinity between the two artificial women shows that the charge of gendered deception is itself a tool of patriarchal violence, flexible enough to be lodged against multiple kinds of women and powerful enough to push those women out of the realm of respectable personhood. The specter of Evelyn Habal intervenes in the interpretation of *Passion of New Eve* that would understand it as simple demystification. The point is not that a certain type of femininity, the self-effacing melancholic beauty of a silent film star, is a male invention designed to torture women and therefore “not real.” The point is that femininity itself is “not real,” always an artificial production that requires significant work to maintain and, crucially, is

rarely recognized as art, often denounced as deception. In these novels, real/fake becomes yet another hierarchical binary, a mode of designating and excluding a subordinate other, undertaken from a position of power; the distinction between authentic and inauthentic gender—like that between masculine and feminine, human and nonhuman, person and thing—functions to mark off those beings who do not matter, who can be used and discarded with impunity.

### **“To be a pane the sun shines through”: affirming feminine objectification**

Thus Tristessa joins the ranks of suspiciously inauthentic women—Alicia, Leilah, Evelyn Habal—whose cyborg bodies are disassembled, exploited, and abandoned in these two novels. All four are cast, in a patriarchal narrative, as nonhuman, despised objects. But is there any way to recuperate this notion of feminine nonhumanity from its abject position within dominant discourse? As I suggest earlier in this chapter, Haraway and Butler, among others, explore the liberating possibilities of an association between femininity and artifice as a way to escape the confines of naturalized binary gender and compulsory heterosexuality. The character of Tristessa offers another approach. Femininity furnishes her with a complicated kind of power that is rooted in, rather than opposed to, objectification.

Tristessa’s attachment to feminine abjection is among her most vexing qualities, according to the second-wave feminist reading of the novel adopted by many critics and occasionally voiced by Eve(lyn). But this reading fails to account for Tristessa’s total commitment to her feminine identity. As a trans woman, Tristessa is not giving instructions on how to be female

from the safe position of masculinity. The ideal of womanhood that she projects may be, as Eve(lyn) argues, impossible to obtain and harmful to attempt; yet she herself is living it, not just propagating it. And unlike Alicia Clary (who barely gets a word in edgewise in a 250-page conversation between men), Leilah (whose vocalizations do not even register as language to her interlocutor), and Evelyn Habal (who only enters the scene as a memory after she's safely, silently dead), Tristessa finds room in the text to voice her own ideas about gender. Despite Eve(lyn)'s disparaging framework, which casts her not only as a liar but as delusional and insane, Tristessa manages to propose her own discourse of feminine nonhumanity and to suggest what a woman might find appealing about being a thing.

For it is as a thing, not a person, that Tristessa feels most at home and protected from the dangers of a world hostile to femininity of all kinds. As she and Eve(lyn) lie entangled on their forced marriage bed, Tristessa provides this explanation of her feminine identity:

“I thought,” he said, “I was immune to rape. I thought that I had become inviolable, like glass, and could only be broken... Passivity,” he said. “Inaction. That time should not act upon me, that I should not die. So I was seduced by the notion of a woman's being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing. To be a pane the sun shines through.” (134)<sup>46</sup>

This speech repeats the age-old trope of woman as negativity—the inverse of man, the absence to his presence, the zero to his one. This trope, the bedrock of the binary gender system, is not initially promising for a feminist reading. It seems to link Tristessa to the novel's original paragon of misogyny, the male Eve(lyn), whose description of Leilah as his negative opposite draws unselfconsciously upon racist and sexist discourse. But is it possible to affirm negativity in and of itself, without reinforcing the hierarchical binary of positive/negative? Tristessa uses

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<sup>46</sup> The past tense of this declaration perhaps attests to the brutality of Zero's assault, which takes advantage of Tristessa's willful vulnerability to an extent that permeates her “immunity.”

a familiar, sexist trope of femininity as a means to access a particular kind of being, one that challenges the conventional requirements for a human subject. Her radical critique of human subjectivity thus takes shape as a perverse appropriation of patriarchal discourse.

For what would it mean to be glass, as Tristessa has attempted to be throughout her acting career? Glass, as she notes, is fragile, easily broken, yet at the same time curiously impenetrable. Anything that attempts to occupy it will find itself merely refracted. Tristessa's metaphorical pane of glass is an absolutely faithful medium: it does not add, subtract, or edit the content of what it transmits. In its passivity, it effaces itself to nothing, yet as a medium it may channel a force as mighty as the sun. The pane of glass recalls the silver screen, the medium by which images of Tristessa are circulated and cherished throughout the world. In the terms of her metaphor, that would make her the sun, the source of the brilliance radiated and transmitted through passive channels. Yet her speech to Eve(lyn) indicates that she rejects this role in favor of identification with the screen itself. A legendary star with a fanatic following, she nonetheless disclaims authorship over her own performances, both professional and personal.

The pivotal question, for Eve(lyn) and Zero as well as for much of the critical writing on this novel, is "who or what is Tristessa, really?" But Tristessa herself answers that question with a graceful sidestep: she is really a medium, not a person. She is Catherine Earnshaw, Madeline Usher, Emma Bovary, and countless other roles; she is not a stable self but a pliable vessel containing the endless stream of reiterated femininity that makes up her career. Thus she quite visibly embodies Butler's argument that "there is no 'I' that precedes the gender that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that 'I'" ("Imitation" 311). There is no "real Tristessa"

who precedes her performances of femininity on- and offscreen, no preexisting male or female person that steps into and out of her roles. Tristessa is the dynamic sum of her performances. The novel shows, though Eve(lyn) is loath to admit it, that Tristessa's performative identity does not make her any less "real." She has an ontological status as well as an iconographic one; she is not just an immaterial fabrication but a material body who lives and breathes, has lovers, values her privacy, and, crucially, wants to avoid suffering. She does not in any sense deserve the violence levied against her: neither her gender nor her self-effacement, those two related modes of nonidentity, constitute legitimate grounds for torture, rape, and murder.

There is a difference, the figure of Tristessa asserts, between objectification as an experimental alternative to the self-aggrandizing individualism of humanist subjectivity, and objectification as a punishment imposed on a being deemed less than human. The latter brutally denies the object any possibility of agency, while the former retains the possibility that objectification, depersonalization, can be a site of some kind of agency. Even a pane of glass, so clear as to be invisible, performs work upon the sunlight it transmits. And even Tristessa, the self-effacing model of feminine passivity, knows how to inject a note of subtle irony into her performances, such as her rhetorical question posed in the process of being forcibly robed by Zero's wives for the sadistic "wedding": "isn't it *every* girl's dream to be married in white?" she muses, combining naive sincerity with a note of subversive bitterness against her captors (130). Perhaps that is why, as Eve(lyn) notes in the novel's opening pages, Tristessa, though not publicly known to be trans, has become a queer icon: "no drag artiste felt his repertoire complete without a personation of her magic and passionate sorrow" (2), and "pairs of sentimental queers" flock to revivals of her films "to pay homage to the one woman in the world who most perfectly expressed a pain they

felt as deeply as, more deeply than, any woman” (1). In contrast to Eve(lyn) as a young boy, who loves Tristessa out of “pure innocence” (2) and is horrified when her performances diverge from his melancholic ideal, Tristessa’s queer audience recognizes the potential for ironic play in her relentless reiteration of femininity. To repeat a norm over and over, to reject the notion of a solid, stable human identity and instead define oneself only as a medium of transmission, is not necessarily to comply with the norm one transmits—although, of course, neither is it necessarily to undermine it.

Repetition is an ambivalent practice. The four women who are the focus of this chapter all demonstrate that ambivalence in the ways each are subject to norms of femininity. I have described these women as self-authored, in marked contrast to each novel’s central female figure; but not one of the four could be said to invent the femininity she embodies. Each one constructs her persona out of existing discourses of femininity, drawn largely from a long-standing hegemonic tradition that tends to restrict, exploit, and devalue the feminine. Each emerges as a collage of misogynistic female traits—vacancy, passivity, deceitfulness, artificiality—and is thus figured as other than and less than human, as objects rather than persons. For the patriarchal discourses within which they are embedded, this object status makes them inviting targets of violence. To be an object is to be consumable and disposable, to be outside the realm of “what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death” (Butler *Precarious* 146).

But for each of the four women, being an object signifies beyond a capacity to be harmed. It represents, first of all, economic and professional gratification: self-objectification is a way to strategically exploit and perform conventions of femininity, the foundation of a successful stage or screen career. Even more crucially, objectivity offers an alternative to the

dominant prescription of human subjectivity, that state of coherent, individual, real personhood to which one must belong to qualify as a body that matters. To the novels' vaunted central author figures—Edison, the man of genius whose prolix discourse on the nature of womanhood is backed by the weight of scientific authority; Eve(lyn), the first-person narrator who experiences gender diversity firsthand, yet lets no other perspectives color her own story—these women oppose a curious and subtle form of resistance: not the strident assertion of a competing author, but the quiet affirmation of the medium, ceaselessly reiterating and re-staging a fiction that comes from elsewhere. “In the end there is no subject, no feminist subject,” Halberstam notes of the ambivalent politics designated as shadow feminisms. “There are gaping holes, empty landscapes, split silhouettes—the self unravels, refuses to cohere, it will not speak, it will only be spoken” (*Queer Art* 144). Never original, never central, never individual, the four women that I designate as self-authored all suggest the ambivalent notion of authorship traced in Rachilde's work in Chapter 1: not the self-assured autonomy of the *auteur*, but the passive agency of the blank page, writing itself via being written by others. Or, to update the metaphor in terms of these particular texts, the agency of the photocopy, destined to duplicate, never create, yet able still to introduce difference, however minuscule, into its reiterations.

## **Conclusions**

In their narrative revelation of gender as a performative technology, Villiers's and Carter's texts link up, perhaps surprisingly, with ongoing contemporary struggles for transgender recognition and equality. So much of the legal, social, political, and even linguistic apparatus for

defining personhood rests on a body's legibility as (only) male or female; as Butler observes, "the construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation" (*Bodies* 8). In the best case scenario, bodies that challenge or complicate gender legibility—by being transgender, intersex, gender-nonconforming, or any combination thereof—are saddled with lifelong bureaucratic and interpersonal difficulties. In the worst cases, these bodies are considered an affront to humanity. Within the patriarchal, cisnormative imaginary that underwrites gender norms, an improperly gendered body, or one that deviates from its presumed natural, given state, is simply not human, not worthy of respect, desire, protection, or safety.<sup>47</sup> Even a trans body that conforms to gender norms—like Tristessa's, glamorized for decades as the pinnacle of romantic femininity—is not allowed to count as "real" once its full history is revealed. The extreme and frequent violence inflicted on trans people for simply being visible in public, and the kind of dehumanizing rhetoric that accompanies such attacks, attests to a double, overlapping set of exclusions: around "man" and "woman" as well as "human."

Yet the notion of cyborg gender undermines the self-avowedly natural basis of all those categories. The kinship that exists among Alicia, Leilah, Evelyn, and Tristessa suggests that the imperative to "pass as a woman" is as pressing for cisgender as for transgender women. It takes significant work for each of them to fit into the category of the feminine, where their position is never stable: if their labors of self-construction are recognized, they are castigated as false.

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<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically, at the same time that gender is linked to "nature" (that is, to the biological state of a body, understood to be immutable and given at birth) in this discourse, the "natural" (that is, plain and unadorned) state of a gendered body, particularly a feminine body, is also frequently deemed unacceptable.



Indeed, the only women who pass without fail, the novels' two New Eves, are those for whom the work of femininity has been made invisible. Hadaly and Eve seem like natural women; the reader, however, knows the extent of the technology that goes into upholding that "natural" state. In the ideology that dominates these texts and continues to dominate the world in which I write, gender is supposed to be an authentic expression of self: gender makes you a person. But in these texts, gender, particularly femininity, becomes an inauthentic construction of artifice, a technology: gender makes you a thing. The four "false women" suggest that this thingness is a quality to be affirmed, not rejected or effaced. Humans, whether we care to acknowledge it or not, are things, cyborg assemblages, impure hybrids whose complicated lives tend to breach their own ideological boundaries. No matter how one comes into a gender identity—anatomically, culturally, hormonally, surgically, sartorially, etc.—gender is among the most deeply entrenched, primary technologies. The fact that it often seems as natural and given as life itself points, as Haraway and Butler insist, to the permeable dynamic between nature and culture, organism and machine, essence and performance. To say so is not to deny the lived experience of gender identity, for many people, transgender, cisgender, and other, identify strongly with their gender (be it male, female, both, between, or beyond) as part of "who they really are." The point is that humanity is itself artificial—and no less real for it.<sup>48</sup>

Both novels, entangled as they are in the inflexible discourse of real versus fake, seem not to offer much hope for the viability of cyborg gender. Each of the four women affirms, in her own way, her status as cyborg, other, nonhuman, thing. Each one acknowledges the

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<sup>48</sup> Salamon makes a similar point in her careful disentanglement of a phenomenological "felt sense of the body" from the fantasy of a "real" body unmediated by discourse. She insists on the need to craft a transsexual and transgender discourse that is not so "problematically reliant on 'the real,' a phrase that... can never quite shed its normativizing and disciplinary dimensions" (2-3).

performativity of her femininity, an artifice that is as real as anything. But Alicia drowns in a shipwreck; Leilah is left bleeding in a hospital emergency room; Evelyn Habal wastes away of disease; Tristessa is shot point-blank by a homophobic militia. Four tragic ends attest to the difficulty of the project these women undertake. I assemble them here to highlight the radical and resistant potential of their lives; their suffering is not inevitable punishment for tampering with nature, but rather an illustration of the social order's hostility to having its foundations revealed. The following chapter will feature another set of women struggling on the margins of culturally-policed personhood: as human-animal hybrids, they are subject to overlapping norms of species, gender, and propriety.

All these marginal women are made to suffer for their differences; yet the world can learn from the lesson they impart. Cyborg gender means more, and more flexible, possibilities for gender expression. It means an end to policing the boundaries of masculine and feminine, an end to a definition of personhood that is coextensive with a system as contrived, exclusive, and tedious as binary gender. And it means, finally, the acknowledgment of a different kind of agency, surprising and difficult to define. The technology of gender does not belong to the individual who embodies and performs it. In some sense, we are all like Tristessa, letting the dusty reels of accumulated performances project themselves upon our skin. At the same time, gender is not just a prison, even when the gender in question is femininity in a patriarchal world. In the endless iterative performances that constitute a self, in the act of being written, even by hegemonic discourses, there is room, still, for agency. Edison and Eve(lyn), the central authorial figures, might get the last word on who, finally, counts as real. But it is these marginal women, brazenly suggesting the possibility of living, working, and desiring outside of compulsory gender

norms, who continue to echo endlessly, suggestively, defiantly across the page.

## CHAPTER III

# Woman/Animal/Object: Monstrous Agency in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Darrieussecq's *Truismes*

A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster.

—Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (27)

In *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), Angela Carter leads her reader through the grisly and elaborate sexual excesses penned by the Marquis de Sade, tentatively seeking in his outrageously rescripted gender relations the foundations of a kind of feminism: “pornography in the service of women” (37). Examining Sade’s two prototypes of femininity—Justine, the virtuous victim who is incessantly punished for her naive attempts to be a good woman; and her antithesis Juliette, the amoral libertine who reaps endless rewards from a life of sexual tyranny—Carter proposes a Sadeian rule: “A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (27). Like many definitive

pronouncements on feminine liberation, this axiom yields multiple readings. One might read it first of all as a straightforward description of female behavior: in order for a woman to achieve freedom in an unfree society, she must act monstrously—that is, inhumanly cruel. If freedom is a zero-sum game, liberation is achieved at the expense of others; thus a woman must objectify other people (as Juliette does) in order to resist being herself objectified (as Justine is). Here monstrosity simply denotes the worst violation of human ethics. From another perspective, however, Carter’s statement might be read as a critique of the social judgment of female behavior: a woman who resists her unfreedom will be perceived as a monster and thus denounced and shunned. Here monstrosity is a category imposed by an unfree society onto those who do not submit; the difference between monstrosity and humanity is exposed as categorical, not inherently ethical.

Both of these readings depend on monstrosity as a metaphor, a common way to represent human behavior that is either intrinsically inimical to, or socially excluded from, normative humanity. This metaphor only makes sense within a humanist context, where human being is ranked above all else and deviation from the human norm is viewed as degradation, rather than neutral difference. But a third possible reading arises if monstrosity is allowed to be more than a metaphor, to release its full bestial potential as a viable alternative to humanity rather than a loathsome failure to achieve it. Perhaps, Carter’s axiom suggests, a woman will not gain freedom in an unfree society by remaining human. Perhaps the state of being an actual monster—an aberrant creature, a “freak of nature”—offers one path toward feminine liberation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The word “monster” derives from the Latin *monstrum*, an aberrant occurrence understood as a prodigy or portent, which in turn comes from *monere*, to warn. Etymologically speaking, a monster is not simply horrifying or unusual, but also significant—against the backdrop of normality, it is made to mean something beyond itself. Affirming monstrosity as such, as I am attempting to do here, moves toward releasing the monster from its service as

This chapter proceeds from the third potential reading of Carter's Sadeian rule, bringing together two stories of feminine freakishness: Carter's own *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996). In these novels, the monstrous condition of woman-animal hybridity helps our heroines scrape their own way out of the unfreedom imposed on human women in their particular cultural milieux. Freedom via monstrosity is certainly no easy route: the female monster is always at risk of objectification, exploitation, abjection. Yet the condition that places her visibly outside of social norms of personhood also allows her to articulate new ideas of what a "person" might be, circumventing the gender- and species-based conventions that tend to govern that category.

As Carter's rule points out, and as the first two chapters of my dissertation have explored, the category "woman" is culturally and historically linked to unfreedom, and more so, to passivity, objecthood, and nonhumanity. One might address that injustice by one of two strategies: on the one hand, by trying to reclaim the category of humanity for women, proclaiming them to be fully human beings; on the other, by moving away from the category of humanity, identifying instead with what it excludes. Chapter 2 explored how Villiers's and Carter's Eve texts move womanhood away from humanity toward the direction of the artificial, articulating a cyborg femininity. This chapter explores two texts that move womanhood away from humanity in a different direction: toward the animal, articulating a bestial, creaturely feminine. They point toward the possibility of freedom not only for women, but also for monsters of all sorts, those who might fly over, or dig under, or wriggle through the cracks of the walls humanity has erected around the categories of gender and species.

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significant symbol, a point I will discuss later in the chapter.

## Speculating feminine monstrosity

In her penultimate novel, Angela Carter imagines what it might mean for a woman to be, quite literally, a monster. *Nights at the Circus* is the tale of Fevvers, a woman who embodies the glorious spectacle of monstrosity. Billed as the “Cockney Venus” and “Helen of the High Wire,” this *aerialiste* is a turn-of-the-century superstar, an object of delirious pop culture fascination; everyone from Grand Dukes to fishmongers, Impressionist painters to street urchins flock to music halls across Europe to see her perform on the flying trapeze. Her spectacular appeal goes beyond gymnastic talent—Fevvers is, or purports to be, a genuine winged woman, the hybrid result of a doomed coupling between human and swan.<sup>2</sup> But the slogan that festoons her promotional materials—“is she fact or is she fiction?”—dares onlookers to question her authenticity, to marvel but also to doubt. We meet Fevvers in London, 1899, as she sits in her dressing room with Jack Walser, a young American reporter to whom she has granted an exclusive interview; in a few days, she is to embark on the Eastern leg of a global tour. She is a woman at the height of her fame: wealthy, autonomous, the object of mass desire yet beholden to none. Her monstrous hybridity, her freakishness, has been manipulated into a profitable, glamorous mythology. Yet Fevvers’s tale reveals the precarious position of a woman who so visibly straddles the line between human and animal, normal and freak, person and object.

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<sup>2</sup> This origin story draws self-consciously on the Greek myth of Leda and the swan, which fascinates Fevvers from an early age (a painting of the scene hangs in the household where she grows up). In the myth, Zeus assumes the form of a swan and, depending on the version, either seduces or rapes the mortal woman Leda. Anne Fernihough contextualizes the particular significance of this myth for the European *fin de siècle* where the novel is set. In response to shifting gender relations, Fernihough suggests, many male artists and poets of the time return to the Leda myth as a site of degenerate female lasciviousness, perceived as both titillating and threatening to masculine authority (97). An earlier Carter novel, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), also invokes Leda and the swan; the young female protagonist is forced to play Leda in a horrifying puppet show that stages her symbolic rape by a cruel patriarchal uncle. In *Nights at the Circus*, the myth is reimagined in a more positive light, as a consensual and boundary-defying encounter between human and animal.

In *Truismes*, French novelist Marie Darrieussecq imagines a different scenario of feminine monstrosity. The novel's nameless narrator begins her tale as a normal human woman, living in a futuristic world characterized by environmental, economic, and moral collapse. But an unexpected metamorphosis changes her gradually and erratically into a pig; henceforth, she lives in a state of fluctuation between human and porcine femininity. At first, Truie (as I designate her) finds that, in a world where women are appreciated strictly as sex objects, her increasing earthy animality is a boon to her personal and professional value.<sup>3</sup> But for the majority of the novel, Truie's hybridity renders her a figure of absolute abjection. Over time she is denied employment, friendship and love, a home, and property; but most crucially, in the world of humans, she is forever denied personhood. Always subject to the whims of others, Truie is in constant danger of the most fatal forms of objectification, the processes that would turn a young woman into a sex object, a freak show, or a (literal) piece of meat. It is only by escaping to the country and taking up with a band of wild pigs that she manages to finally enjoy a peaceful and satisfying life, and in her free time, scratch out her memoirs in a muddy notebook, grasping the pen between her hooves with painstaking difficulty.

Both novels situate themselves at times of significant futurity, where the very passage of time seems to guarantee an unsettling of the status quo. *Nights at the Circus*, published in 1984 but set in 1899, retrospectively imagines a point in time, the turn of the century, that promises great cultural upheaval; it returns to the past in order to reopen possibilities foreclosed in the ensuing

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<sup>3</sup> The title of *Truismes* is a pun: it literally means "truisms" but contains the word "truie" (sow). In the spirit of the title, I name the narrator Truie to recognize her as both a sow and the author of these truisms. Linda Coverdale's English translation, published in 1997, alludes to the French pun by substituting one in English, with the title *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*.



years.<sup>4</sup> *Truismes*, published in 1996 but set in a disastrous near-future, predicts dire consequences for the current environmental, social, and political state of affairs yet allows that something good might emerge from the wreckage of human civilization. Each novel stages a moment of possibility, where the rules about who, what, and how to be might be rewritten for a new age; each centers on a hybrid figure, one who cannot help but run amok over cultural definitions of acceptable gender, species, and personhood. These two “womanimals” illustrate the strong ambivalence of feminine monstrosity, which marks its bearer as other than human. The monstrous woman might be worshipped as superhuman or belittled as subhuman, but cannot be assimilated into normal humanity. As these novels illustrate, nonhumanity is a dangerous state, in which one is subject to exploitation of all sorts. Yet the central question of my dissertation resurfaces here: what might be the value of nonhumanity, of deliberate difference from the human norm? How might the embrace of nonhumanity foster a new understanding of personhood, one that does not require the violent exercise of power to bolster itself? The hybridity of the womanimal provokes a network of questions about practices of exploitation that tend to structure relationships between humans and animals and between men and women. Is it possible, these texts ask, to reconstruct those relationships in more mutually fulfilling, non-exploitative ways? What would be required in order to do so? Might the rigidity of the categories themselves— “human,” “animal,” “man,”

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<sup>4</sup> Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation also returned to the end of the nineteenth century in a speculative mode, approaching the worlds of *Monsieur Vénus* and *L’Eve Future* to explore their difficult questions about gender, authorship, agency, and personhood (questions we are still struggling with in the current day), and to excavate their more radical ideas that, even over a century later, have yet to be widely recognized. Through her fiction, Angela Carter undertakes a similar task, exploring the possibilities that the end of the nineteenth century seems to open up for womanhood, partnership, and interspecies relations. Such an approach to the past might be criticized for ahistoricism and inauthenticity in relation to its subject matter. But Sarah Gamble, discussing *Nights at the Circus* as a “neo-Victorian novel,” defends that genre. Readers of neo-Victorian texts can “either approach them as rather hopeless replicas of an original they can never hope to properly be, or welcome the possibilities for experimentation, play, and reconfiguration they might represent” (131). Carter’s novel and my own reading both favor the latter approach.

“woman”—be to blame? And how might figures of hybridity, crisscrossing around and between those categories, sniff a way out?

Charting the misadventures of their monstrous heroines, the novels take full advantage of the creative and political possibilities of the speculative fiction mode. To the long history of misogynist tropes that liken women to animals, objects, and freaks in order to designate them as second-class citizens, Carter and Darrieussecq pose a challenge: what would it really be like if a woman were her own species? What would it be like to take the metaphor seriously and let it shape reality? How might it explode, not reinforce, its patriarchal foundation? In the speculative ontology of these texts, Fevvers and Trueie are literal feminine/animal/objects, embodying three related modes of what is rejected from the conventional category of (implicitly masculine) human rational subjectivity. In order to tell her own story in its specificity as other-from-the-norm, each must develop her own form of posthumanist authorship that recognizes and valorizes the freewheeling agency of a range of beings. Yet each also encounters a limit to this recognition; in these novels, traces of a familiar humanism prevent the fulfillment of a posthumanist utopia, a point I explore toward the end of the chapter. What can these texts do, and not do, in their literalization of the metaphor of woman-as-monster? How do they critique existing relations of gender- and species-based power, and in what ways do they remain complicit?

## **The enduring trope of the womanimal**

As both these novels and the critical responses to them make clear, animality, in an anthropocentric world, is never allowed to simply be itself; it tends to be taken as raw material

for human purposes. This animal material can be physical—meat, leather, labor, etc.—but also symbolic: animals are made to bear meaning in ways that are at best irrelevant (and at worst fatal) for living critters. The anthropocentric assumption that animals are significant only insofar as they signify for humans tends to govern the reading of literary animals. As Susan McHugh points out, animal figures abound in many kinds of texts, yet are only granted literary value when read as allegories or fables, “as at best metaphorically speaking of and for the human”; turned into metaphors, animals can be said to “[inhabit] literature without somehow being represented” (6). But Carter and Darrieussecq write animality into their novels such that an animal can both mean and simply be. Both engage with the symbolic and allegorical resonance of their heroines’ specific forms of animality, to the extent that one could read the womanimal in these novels as a purely symbolic figure, a woman whose animality serves to heighten and exaggerate a story that is, nonetheless, fundamentally concerned with the human condition. The critical approach to both books generally tends to downplay the intrinsic significance of animality, to read *Truismes* as a fable about the objectification of human women by human men, and *Nights at the Circus* as a story about a fully human woman who happens to be winged. I intervene in this critical trend to focus on the irreducible, non-metaphorical animality of both womanimals, and on each novel’s nuanced critique of animal symbolism and of the human imaginary within which animals exist as signifiers rather than living creatures. Carter and Darrieussecq make strategic use of the ways birds and pigs signify culturally, yet they do not let those human-authored narratives overwrite the animal’s own story, significant in and of itself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Carter’s work, in particular, tends to be read anthropocentrically, as Mary S. Pollock notes: though her fiction is rife with nonhumans, both ordinary and extraordinary, they are generally interpreted by critics as metaphors for the human condition. Pollock, however, traces a tentative animal theory across Carter’s oeuvre that challenges hegemonic species discourses, suggesting that her poetic language might act as a way to undermine

The long and widespread cultural tradition that imagines a special association between women and animals can be read in both politically radical and regressive ways. In its most basic form, this trope associates women and animals to highlight their shared divergence from the human masculine norm, often to deny women, understood as irrational, the status of full human beings. Yet this same trope can be productive, calling attention to interconnections between sexism and speciesism to build a politics of liberation for both women and animals. Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan, whose collaborative work in the 1990s and 2000s lays the foundation for the feminist tradition of care in animal ethics, call attention to the interconnection between the oppression of women and that of animals, and note the anthropocentrism inherent in the simple rejection of the trope, which is the approach taken by mainstream feminist discourse.<sup>6</sup> To claim that women are fully rational and human, like men but unlike animals, means embracing only a partial liberation from the violence of patriarchy, consigning animals to inferiority so that women may rise above. Adams and Donovan insist on a theory and praxis that combines (but does not rank) feminism and animal advocacy, examining personal and cultural relationships between women and animals in order to critique their shared status as the “other” of man.<sup>7</sup>

The enduring and ambivalent woman-as-animal trope functions as a backdrop for the humanist logocentrism and facilitate encounters with nonhumanity: “Since Carter, like the rest of us, lacked refined discursive tools for speaking of non-human animals, her antic language—the language which challenges and evades the symbolic order—contains the richest expressions of the nuances in her thinking about them” (39).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, their 1995 co-edited volume *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*. For an overview of feminist interventions into philosophical and ethical discussions of animals, see Lori Gruen and Kari Weil’s editors’ introduction to a 2012 special issue of *Hypatia* on “Animal Others.”

<sup>7</sup> At its best, this tradition of posthumanist feminism emphasizes the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression, situating hierarchies of gender, species, race, class, ability, sexuality, and more in relation to one another. Maneesha Deckha calls attention, however, to the pervasive tendency of posthumanist feminism to privilege gender as the single most important unit of analysis, sidelining questions of race, culture, and colonialism and overlooking important conceptual overlaps between discourses of racial and species privilege. The relationship between gender and species is my primary focus in this chapter, but, mindful of Deckha’s critique, I highlight the ways that they intersect with other power dynamics, despite the tendency of both novels (or at least their white protagonists) to be rather flippant, even hostile, on questions of race and ethnicity.

lives of Fevvers and Truie; their avian and porcine incarnations invoke particular, and often gendered, cultural histories. Fevvers provides a case study of what it might mean for a woman to be a bird—and not just a “bird,” an English slang term for a woman that the Oxford English Dictionary dates back to the fourteenth century. The motif of a woman-bird crossing has a long and varied history, taking diverse and polysemous forms. The harpy of Greek and Roman myth, a fearsome monster with the body of a bird and face of a woman, suggests the potential power of a woman-bird hybrid, while stories of the bird bride or swan maiden, an element of folklore from around the globe, tend to emphasize the creature’s tragic vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> In popular usage, demeaning designations like “bird” and “chick” tend to suggest a creature that is sexually available but otherwise insignificant.<sup>9</sup> The novel takes an informed approach to this multifarious trope; Fevvers cites, in order to undermine, the metaphor of woman as man’s fragile, feathery pet. The signature tune for her circus act is “Only a bird in a gilded cage,” a popular 1900 ballad that uses the image of the caged bird to represent the plight of a woman who married for money and now suffers a loveless life: “her beauty was sold, for an old man's gold/She's a bird in a gilded cage.”<sup>10</sup> The song describes a bird/woman as a kept object, a winged creature that theoretically

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<sup>8</sup> See Boria Sax’s *The Serpent and the Swan* for an analysis of the swan maiden, embedded in the cultural history of the widespread animal bride trope.

<sup>9</sup> English employs a number of specific avian terms as slang for women, including “chick” (usually a young woman), “hen” (often applied to an irritating wife—i.e. one who “henpecks”), and “biddy” (usually an old and, again, irritating woman). All three refer to the chicken, an animal regarded by most humans solely as a source of eggs and meat—that is, an object to be exploited. Not the most glorious of birds (at least in the conventional human imaginary), the chicken is bound to the coop, its wings destined not for flight but for consumption. As Joan Dunayer points out in her examination of sexist and speciesist language, “if hens were not held captive and treated as nothing more than bodies, their lives would not supply symbols for the lives of stifled and physically exploited women” (13); the metaphor that underlies the casual use of “chick” thus represents women as cackling, impotent, domestic, and made for consumption. Donna Haraway’s “Chicken” (Chapter 10 of *When Species Meet*) puts pressure on the common human disregard for chickens, proposing “chicken” as a keyword of global politics, technoscience, and literature.

<sup>10</sup> This bird is captive and powerless, but poignantly, beautifully so. The observers who voice the song’s lyrics might pity her caged state, but they also enjoy looking at it; the song thus teeters on the fence between deploring and aestheticizing female submissiveness. See Wikipedia for the full lyrics. Carter reiterates the motif of a woman as caged bird in her short story “The Lady of the House of Love” from the collection *The Bloody Chamber*. An ancient

could, but is not allowed to, soar. But the song is purely ironic for Fevvers: onstage, she performs her resistance to the fate of a pet by bursting out of her “cage” and flying freely.

The bird in the gilded cage suggests yet another trope of feathery femininity: the Victorian ideal woman figured as “the angel in the house.”<sup>11</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, tracing the literary history of the woman angel, identify it as one of the most persistent and pernicious male constructs of femininity: the angel in the house embodies those “eternal feminine” virtues of modesty, compliancy, self-effacement, and other modes of feminine passivity devoted to fostering male activity (23).<sup>12</sup> Yet Carter invokes the figure of the angel only as Fevvers’s antithesis. Though adoring Parisian crowds call her “*l’Ange Anglaise*, the English Angel” (8), her wings are the only thing about her that might be called angelic—and those, rather than unsoiled white, are dyed the garish palette of a tropical bird. “At close quarters,” Jack thinks, “it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel... though they said she was ‘divinely tall,’ there was, off-stage, not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar” (12). In contrast to the delicate, ethereal Victorian “angel,” Fevvers is solid, hearty, and corporeal. And while the angel is demure, submissive to her husband, and devoted to domesticity, Fevvers deliberately resists those expectations in her personal life and her politics. A single woman, raised in a feminist household, working for herself

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vampiress, weary of her gloomy solitude and inexorable hunger, compares herself to her own caged lark, asking “Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it sing a new song?” (195). In trying to “sing a new song”—to refrain from feeding upon her male lover—the lady acquires human mortality, though it is unclear whether that fate represents a blessing or a curse.

<sup>11</sup> The trope refers to the 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore, in which a man narrates his courtship of and marriage to the adoring, divinely innocent Honoria. Lines like “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure” make the poem and its eponymous ideal particularly irksome to a long line of feminist writers, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, and Gilbert and Gubar.

<sup>12</sup> The angel and the monster, for Gilbert and Gubar, figure as two of the many tropes that male authors have imposed upon women through the history of literature; their task as feminist critics is to “dissect in order to murder” those tropes (17). Carter takes a different approach with Fevvers, who combines both images (woman as angel *and* monster) in order to simultaneously embody and deconstruct them.

and refusing to be controlled (or seduced) by any man, Fevvers explicitly identifies herself with an alternative figure of Victorian womanhood: the “New Woman,” a late nineteenth-century feminist ideal of spirited female social, political, sexual, and economic independence. The New Woman, Sally Ledger explains, is a figure of reverse discourse: that is, she appears primarily (and very popularly) in dominant discourse as a kind of “straw feminist” to fear, ridicule, and repress. But by naming the thing it despises, this hostile dominant discourse also opens up cultural space for a feminist affirmation of New Woman values (Ledger 9-10). In her own signifying system, Fevvers’s wings represent this vision of feminine liberation, the exact opposite of the “angel in the house” who cannot fly away.

Truie, on the other hand, embodies a womanimal trope bereft of any such loftiness. Pigs and humans have a shared history stretching back well over ten thousand years, and like many creatures that have lived so long in close proximity to humans, pigs conjure a range of contradictory cultural meanings. Stallybrass and White examine a number of pig figures from specific discursive sites across history, noting, for instance, records of early Greek and Latin slang that denote *porcus* or *porcellus* as degrading descriptions of female genitalia, and the modern hostile designation of police officers as pigs. The common thread, they assert, is that the pig is a figure of quintessential ambivalence. In the human imaginary, pigs represent a cluster of qualities—filth, slovenliness, voracity, laziness, boorishness—that, though designated as negative, are celebrated as well as reviled: “Pigs seem to have borne the brunt of our rage, fear, affection and desire for the ‘low’” (44).

Part of this ambivalence seems to emerge from the way pigs tend to unsettle the human/animal boundary. In rural early modern Europe, Stallybrass and White note, pigs are kept

close to the house and fed leftovers from human meals, “almost, but not quite, members of the household” who “almost, but not quite, followed the dietary regimes of humans” (47). Because they mingle so freely in human spaces, pigs are among the most frequent defendants in medieval animal trials, often charged with the murder of a human being and sentenced accordingly; these legal rituals, Colin Dayan argues, cast the offending animals as rational beings, expected, like humans, to take responsibility for their crimes (179).<sup>13</sup> The close-but-not-quite-human status of pigs emerges in contemporary settings as well. As Colonel Kearney reminds his circus employees in *Nights at the Circus*, human flesh prepared for consumption is sometimes called “long pig,” a play on the supposed continuity between human and pig meat.<sup>14</sup> In the context of modern biotechnology, pigs are considered the best candidates for xenotransplantation: their bodies are similar enough to humans’ to yield usable organs for transplant, but different enough to reduce the risk of cross-species disease transmission—and, crucially, different (that is, nonhuman) enough that the process can officially be considered “ethical.”<sup>15</sup>

But Darrieussecq’s novel is not just about piggishness, but about “truisme” (“sow-ishness”), a specifically feminine state. In the introduction to her 2006 short story collection *Zoo*, Darrieussecq repeats the question frequently posed to her since the publication of *Truismes*: “*Pourquoi une truie?*” (“*Why a sow?*”). In response, she offers a delightfully extensive list of

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<sup>13</sup> For records of individual trials, including the trial of a pig charged with eating an infant, see Luc Ferry and Claudine Germé, *Des Animaux et des Hommes*. For further analysis of this curious medieval phenomenon, see Paul Schiff Berman, “Rats, Pigs, and Statues on Trial.”

<sup>14</sup> “Pigs eat everything a man eats,” the Colonel expounds. “That’s why a man tastes same as a pig. That’s why cannibals called roasted *homo sapiens* ‘long pig,’ yessir! Omnivores, see; mixed feedin’! Gives us both that gamey taste” (203). “Long pig” is a term of uncertain origin, generally attributed as a translation from an unspecified language of the Pacific Islands.

<sup>15</sup> For a science-fictional exploration of biotech pigs, see Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, especially the first volume *Oryx and Crake*, set in a speculative near-future where pig xenotransplantation is an everyday reality. The “pigoon” is a genetically modified species of uncannily intelligent pigs that serve as transgenic hosts for the growth and harvesting of human organs. When society collapses, however, the pigoon becomes a particularly hostile and dangerous enemy to human survivors.



possible, but improbable, alternatives:

Je n'ai pas vraiment de réponse, sauf statistique. On traite les femmes de truie plus souvent que de jument, de vache, de guenon, de vipère ou de tigresse; plus souvent encore que de girafe, de sang-sue, de limace, de pieuvre ou de tarentule; et beaucoup plus souvent que de scolopendre, de rhinocéros femelle ou de koala. (7)

I don't really have an answer, except a statistical one. One calls women sows more often than mares, cows, female monkeys, vipers or tigresses; even more often than giraffes, leeches, slugs, octopi or tarantulas; and far more often than centipedes, female rhinoceroses or koalas.<sup>16</sup>

There is a vast diversity of nonhuman life in this world, Darrieussecq reminds us, and yet certain creatures catch humans' fancy and come to mean for them in particular ways. This "statistical" alignment of women and sows that she refers to is not neutral: there is something about the pig that makes it a privileged signifier of improper, degraded femininity in a way that an octopus or a centipede is not. The French "truie," like the lesser-used English "sow," is a derogatory term for a woman who is fat, dirty, or oversexed, a charge that names a particularly feminine kind of revolting nonhumanness. But the most important feature of the pig, in terms of this novel, is that humans like to eat it; this animal's dead flesh inspires much more love than its living incarnation.<sup>17</sup> The trope of the pig-woman thus emphasizes the particular consumability of pigs and women. Both run the risk of being reduced to mere flesh, of falling prey to mankind's appetite in both its sexual and its carnivorous form.

## **Objectifying the womanimal**

Throughout the course of their unusual lives, Fevvers and Truie encounter many versions of the same threat. Their hybrid state combines femininity and animality, two particularly

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<sup>16</sup> My translation.

<sup>17</sup> See Katharine Rogers for a global cultural history of pork, "the most widely eaten meat in the world... the most versatile of meats" (7).

vulnerable modes of being in an anthropocentric, patriarchal world. Thus each is subject to multiple, overlapping forms of objectification, the force that threatens to turn her from a living person into a dead thing. For Fevvers, who lives in the spotlight, objectification manifests as a spectator's drive to symbolize her—that is, to make a symbol of her, to imprison her as fixed signifier within a system not of her own making. For Trueie, who is defined as meat both as woman and pig, objectification manifests as a specifically carnal threat, the voracious desire to consume flesh designated sexually available and/or edible. In these novels, objectification is no metaphor; the objects Fevvers and Trueie are threatened with becoming (for instance, a statue or a pork chop) are quite concrete.

Carter and Darrieussecq thus use the imaginative possibilities of speculative fiction to literalize a key concept of feminist theory—to link objectification to reification, the turning of a person into a thing. Objectification, particularly important for many theorists and activists of second-wave feminism, names the pervasive tendency for women to be stripped of agency in patriarchal culture and defined purely in terms of their sexual or other function for men. In Martha Nussbaum's influential definition, objectification is “treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (257). That is, objectification as such can only be done to a human. It is precisely the humanity of the objectified that makes it a moral wrong.<sup>18</sup>

But how does the threat of objectification work against women who are not quite human, or do not wish to be? *Truismes* and *Nights at the Circus* introduce some ambivalence

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<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum names seven ways that objectification is achieved: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (257). She traces the Kantian roots of the concept through the radical feminism of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, but also introduces a degree of nuance that she sees as lacking in all three, pointing out, for instance, the possibility of mutually gratifying objectification in consensual sexual relationships.

into the feminist debate. On the one hand, through their heroines' struggles for autonomy in an oppressive world, the novels clearly illustrate the physical and emotional violence involved in being objectified. On the other hand, they also explore what might be valuable or desirable about being an object, suggesting a third term in the trinity of otherness—feminine/animal/object. Fevvers and Truie each find a kind of agency in being other-than-human; their outcast status allows a certain freedom even as it renders them vulnerable to harm. The feminist strategy of empowering women by affirming them as humans thus does not quite work here; recuperating Fevvers and Truie as fully human subjects would erase the richness of their hybrid ontology, which combines human and nonhuman, subjectivity and objectivity. In their speculative treatment of objectification, Carter and Darrieussecq suggest not that women are humans and thus undeserving of objectification, but that difference from the norm—femininity, animality, irrationality, or some other form of freakishness—cannot justify the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. It is not only human women, but also the whole range of feminine/animal/object possibility, that matters to these texts' hybrid feminism.

Thus the speculative mode becomes a political necessity, a way to push the feminist critique of objectification beyond the experiences of human women. Too often, as Adams argues in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, humans consign animals to the status of the “absent referent”: animals themselves are effaced by the objects humans make of them. By insisting on the hybrid womanimality of their heroines, the texts call to mind the nonhumans whose lives and deaths furnish humankind with a wealth of material and symbolic capital, the bodies whose reification forms the basis of metaphor. These novels re-animate and re-present the absent referents of longstanding womanimal tropes. To read them in an allegorical mode would be to corral those

animal bodies back into the stifling enclosure of human signification, to make these stories, like most other stories, all about humans; that reading would echo, however faintly, the more dramatic processes of objectification endured by Fevvers and Truie. I choose instead to follow Carter and Darrieussecq into uncharted speculative territory, taking these womanimals figures “literally” as hybrids rather than reducing their animality to metaphor. I hope that this speculative reading can escape the humanist conservatism of allegory in order to trace the novels’ nuanced critique of the objectification of both women and animals.

**“She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea”: the significance of difference**

As a winged woman, Fevvers is defined by significant difference. Her body makes her an eternal exception; there is no available context within which she would appear ordinary. *Nights at the Circus* revolves around the meaning of this difference—and, crucially, around the question of who gets to determine that meaning. Every chapter of my dissertation emphasizes the power involved in storytelling. Telling one’s own story can be an act of empowerment; telling the story of another can be an act of love or hostility (or both). The theatrical Fevvers revels in making meaning of herself; she has strategic reasons to present herself as a significant symbol instead of, or as well as, a living being. But she walks a fine line when she exploits her wings for their symbolic value: turning herself into a meaningful object, she makes herself vulnerable to appropriation by the signifying systems of others who would disarm, affix, and silence her. *Nights at the Circus* suggests the possibility of productive self-objectification, but also explores the potential violence involved in imposing meaning from without—in turning a living creature

into a symbol without her consent.

The violent threat of involuntary symbolization provides *Nights at the Circus* with its moments of highest drama. Each of novel's three sections climaxes in a struggle between Fevvers and a foe who, attracted by her singular wings, attempts to turn her from a person into a symbolic object; she is plagued by "mages, wizards, impresarios" who "came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself" (289). In the first section, she is purchased by a wealthy occultist whose obscure mythology holds that the sacrifice of a "Dark Angel" will bring him eternal life. In the second, she is almost snared by a Russian grand duke who plans to shrink her into the exquisite golden cage of a jeweled Fabergé egg. In the third, she nearly gets absorbed as an apparition into the oneiric cosmogony of an indigenous Siberian shaman. All three crises share the same underlying logic: the goal is to possess Fevvers, to secure her significant difference for a desired end. Under the gaze of her captors, Fevvers "felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea" (289), and ideas, in the speculative ontology of this novel, are reified: the three men's ideas about Fevvers threaten to transform her according to their desires. The occultist imagines her as a Goddess in order to shed her holy blood; the duke imagines her as a marvelous artifact in order to add her to his toy collection; the shaman imagines her as a vision in order to control her with his magical skill. In each case, the man who sets the terms and affixes meaning wields power over the woman he conscripts as his symbol. The meaning she attaches to herself comes close to being fatally overwritten as she is reinterpreted as a spiritual commodity (for the occultist and the shaman) or a material one (for the duke).

The nature of these threats points to the intersecting power dynamics that make Fevvers

particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In each case she is pursued because of her uniqueness, yet in each case symbolization proceeds along utterly conventional channels—it is women, animals, and freaks who fall victim to this kind of violence, and Fevvers is all three. In these examples of symbolic violence, gender, species, and monstrosity are inextricably bound; thus we are not surprised to learn that the wealthy occultist gives speeches to Parliament advocating against women's rights, or that the Shaman yearly slaughters a ceremonial bear. The novel notes particular expressions of violence against women, animals, and freaks to build a critique of the underlying logic of symbolization that links all three. This intersectionality is crucial to my reading of *Nights at the Circus*. It is not simply because Fevvers is the story's heroine that the repeated scenes of symbolic violence against her are shown to be unjust. The injustice does not depend on her being “really a human,” falsely exploited in the manner that humans are used to exploiting animals. Instead, the specific form of Fevvers's vulnerability to objectification links her to her animal kin. Though the novel tends to downplay the animality of its heroine compared to *Truismes*, which voices a distinctly piggy view of the world, it nonetheless recognizes and deplores the way that animality functions for humankind as something subordinate, exploitable, and killable. It is Fevvers's wings, her most animal part, that make her who she is: like her avian kin, she enjoys the freedom of flight yet is susceptible to being caged. Her struggles against capture thus illustrate the injustice of objectifying all kinds of creatures.

But Fevvers, too, is committed to making meaning out of her difference. Her processes of self-objectification, self-commodification, and self-symbolization serve as a narrative rejoinder to the predatory attempts of others to overwrite her. Fevvers loves nothing more than to spin herself into a dazzlingly good story: her shrewd self-authored symbology garners her the wealth

and fame needed to live freely as an independent woman. Her wings thus serve her both as a solid, six-foot material reality and as a productive idea. From their first emergence when she is fourteen, Fevvers' wings are allied to the signifying system of turn-of-the-century feminist politics. A foundling, she is raised in the sisterly community of a brothel, where the women devote themselves to intellectual pursuits by day and service their johns by night. When her wings unfurl in the tumult of puberty, they come to symbolize, for her well-read and politically active feminist family, a future without the systematic oppression of women: the young Fevvers represents "the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no woman will be bound to the ground"<sup>19</sup> In this context of love and solidarity, the meaning of Fevvers's difference emerges collaboratively: it is not imposed on her by a stranger, but developed with her participation according to principles to which she is devoted. For these women, the winged girl is never a freak, but an apt mascot for the feminine freedom they cherish, especially since she comes of age at the end of the nineteenth century. The symbolic promise of a new age provides a backdrop against which a flying girl, freed from the constraints of human anatomy, visualizes a longed-for future, when women will be freed from all the arbitrary constraints of a patriarchal world.

Throughout her life, Fevvers holds to the feminist lessons that shaped her from an

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<sup>19</sup> The development of Fevvers's wings is also closely linked to female sexual development: they begin as a pair of "little feathery buds" in childhood, develop at puberty into "an infernal itching in my back... an almost pleasurable irritation," and finally erupt into adolescent wings that are "moist, sticky, like freshly unfurled foliage on an April tree" (23-24). This correlation suggests a link between female sexuality and monstrosity, further supported by Fevvers's fellow prisoners at the Museum of Woman Monsters (a combination freak show/brothel where she is imprisoned in her youth) whose abnormalities also emerge with puberty. Within the patriarchal milieu that defines her era, the messy everyday experience of being a woman appears just as freakish as Fevvers's extraordinary anatomy; both kinds of deviance might be viewed as despicable, but also provide the grounds for transgressive resistance to demure classical norms of femininity. As Fernihough puts it in her analysis of Fevvers as a Bakhtinian grotesque body, "The female body, functioning as such, is perhaps the ultimate threat for classicism" (99).

early age; if she forgets them, Lizzie, her anarchist foster mother and lifelong companion, is always prepared with a stern reminder. In her trapeze act, Fevvers abstracts these political principles into theater, exploiting the symbolism of the winged woman to tease out its liberating potential. She begins each performance curled in a feathery ball, imprisoned behind tinsel bars—her “gilded cage.” But when the trapeze is lowered, the bird-woman spreads her wings and soars. This representation of feminine power resonates with her personally, but is also, in its heavy-handedness, a useful marketing schtick for her stage career. The ease with which Fevvers translates feminism into capitalism reveals a potential pitfall of self-objectification: she risks turning herself into an empty signifier, employing womanimality into a sexy selling point detached from the actual liberation of either women or animals. After all, she might present herself as the unshackled New Woman, but the primary function of her Winged Woman act is to make herself wealthy—a personal, rather than political, gain. Through the drama of the three foes attempting to impose meaning on Fevvers against her will, the novel critiques the violence involved in conscripting a living being as a symbol. In the contrast between two usages of the winged woman—radical call to arms or fashionable commodity—the novel registers another form of concern, exploring the ambivalence involved in turning even oneself into a symbol. What, after all, does a symbol actually do? What kind of work does it achieve?

Fevvers never quite makes up her mind what she wants to achieve through self-symbolization: does she want to inspire real social change, or is she content to remain a pretty (and profitable) picture? Lizzie, on the other hand, remains steadfastly dedicated to radical causes above all else, disdainful of her daughter’s attachment to luxury. The unresolved conflicts that haunt their otherwise affectionate relationship allow the novel to voice a critique of Fevvers’s



over-reliance on the symbol of the winged woman, which cannot substitute, Lizzie insists, for the actual work involved in feminist politics. In their conversations, Lizzie's hard-boiled skepticism serves as a blunt rejoinder to Fevvers's romantic idealism:

“And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah then! all the women will have wings, the same as I... The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed—”

“It's going to be more complicated than that,” interpolated Lizzie... “You improve your analysis, girl, and *then* we'll discuss it.” (285-286)

In her exhortation, Fevvers gets swept up in the symbolic glory of the winged woman, the open dollhouse, the unlocked cage; but from Lizzie's perspective, her daughter's rhetorical flair amounts to no more than a comforting narrative, masking the difficulty of achieving the imagined New Age. As Ledger points out, the New Woman functions at the *fin de siècle* as a primarily discursive figure, deployed for both pro- and anti-feminist ends; the relationship between the figure and the material work of nineteenth-century feminism is complex and troubled (3-4). The conversation between foster mother and daughter mirrors that historical friction. Lizzie starkly interrupts Fevvers's impassioned speech, recalling the danger of entrusting political hopes to symbols. Readers cannot count on Fevvers to be a feminist heroine. Her wings help her spin a good story about the future of feminine liberation; but as Carter, writing from the vantage point of that supposed New Age, well knows, much work remains to be done to turn that speculative vision into reality.

A posthumanist point of view suggests another critique of Fevver's self-symbolization: the metaphor of the winged woman, whether used for radical politics or for selling circus tickets, does nothing for actual birds. Indeed, little attention is paid to birds in this novel; though many

nonhuman creatures come to life on its pages, no birds are among them. Though Fevvers recounts to Jack how, as a girl, she diligently studied the anatomy, flight, and behavior of birds as a model for her own burgeoning avian ability, she seems to have no particular kinship with them as an adult; in Adams's terms, they are the absent referent in the metaphor of the winged woman that gives personal and professional meaning to her life. The symbolic eclipse of birds as actual animals seems to pass unnoticed; no one in the novel criticizes Fevvers for her neglect of animal politics, the way Lizzie criticizes her neglect of feminist politics. In this comparative reading, however, *Truismes* offers that critique. In its confrontation between a living animal and the dead metaphors humanity wants to make of her, *Truismes* avidly embraces a posthumanist perspective, exploring the specific possibilities of animal agency and authorship. In contrast, *Nights at the Circus* sometimes seems stuck in the trappings of humanism. The story attributes marvelous forms of agency to its elephants, apes, and tigers, but is less willing to explicitly acknowledge the animal that Fevvers is.

Nevertheless, in the complex array of symbolic uses to which Fevvers the winged woman is put, both by herself and by others, the novel suggests a profound discomfort with that operation, a discomfort that points after all toward a posthumanist animal politics. On the one hand, a symbol might serve as an empty signifier, occupying the space that might otherwise be devoted to real meaningful action—the critique represented by the canny Lizzie. On the other hand, the novel suggests an even stronger lesson: symbolism, when imposed on a living being against its will, is a form of appropriation, and the urge to symbolize can be akin to the urge to collect, tame, and kill. What do we do when we conscript another into our signifying system, Carter implicitly asks? Whom do we harm? What happens to birds when we make them

emblems of freedom or captivity, and to pigs when we make them emblems of filth or greed? When it is imposed unilaterally from without, symbolization both enables physical violence and is itself a form of violence: it erases the other's being to inscribe its own story, reducing the complexity of a life to a single meaning. It functions as a particular form of authorship—the power to set the terms of the story that is entangled, in this project, with discourses of gender and species. It is also, as I will discuss in a subsequent section of this chapter, the central struggle in Fevvers's tempestuous romance with Jack—the man whose love for the woman herself is hard to disentangle from his love for the story he would make of her.

### **“The wonderful quality of my flesh”: carnivore sexuality**

For Fevvers, the threat of objectification takes a somewhat intellectual form: the object she risks becoming is a symbol or *objet d'art*. For Trueie, in contrast, the threat is quite material: the object she risks becoming is flesh, valuable not for its signifying or decorative power but for its capacity to provide carnal pleasure via sex or consumption—or a combination of the two. Trueie's disquieting transition between woman-flesh and pig-flesh, both vulnerable to being consumed in one way or another by voracious men, leads many critics to read *Truismes* as a feminist fable, in which the woman's animality represents the way she is degraded, objectified, and consumed in a patriarchal society. In this reading, *Truismes* might be seen as an extended meditation on the feminist slogan that “A woman is not a piece of meat.”

Yet to read the novel as a fable does not do justice to the specificity of Trueie's experience, to the horror and injustice of the exploitation she faces as both a woman and a pig. *Truismes* is ultimately not “really about” either sexual or literal predation, as if one had to

choose the more meaningful of them to guide one's reading; instead, it addresses the structure of carnivorous objectification that underlies both gender and species relationships. As such, it functions as a near-perfect textual partner to Adam's feminist-vegetarian theory, which insists on the interconnectedness of gender and species oppression in a patriarchal, carnivorous society.<sup>20</sup> Both women and animals are objectified, made into fleshy objects rather than persons in order to facilitate their exploitation. Where mainstream feminism seeks to empower women by declaring "A woman is not a piece of meat"—that is, a woman should not be objectified because a woman is a human, not an animal—Adams makes an important intervention by refusing to let meat be just a metaphor. Meat, as a tangible object as well as a concept, relies on animal bodies as its absent referent, in both a physical sense—butchery makes a living animal disappear—and a metaphorical one—when a human claims to "feel like a piece of meat," the animal's own experience of becoming meat is effaced (*Meat* 66-67). When feminism appropriates the language of butchery to critique violence against women, but ignores violence against animals as an issue in its own right, it leaves in place the fundamental structure of patriarchal objectification and ignores the intersections between different forms of violence (90). Adams's project is to restore presence to the absent referent, to re-member the animals whose bodies are dismembered and objectified into meat. *Truismes* joins Adams in "accord[ing] the absent referent its own existence" (*Meat* 67), rendering the links between woman, animal, and meat unmistakably, uncomfortably present.

The story begins with Truie as a young, fully human woman looking for work. As she enters the beginning stages of metamorphosis, the changes happening in her body are unexpected,

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<sup>20</sup> I say near-perfect because *Truismes*, as I discuss at the end of the chapter, is definitely not a vegetarian text. It suggests, but does not enact the more radical promise of Adams's theory.

but not unwelcome. A certain new quality of her flesh makes her more desirable and, as she discovers at a job interview, more employable:

Le directeur de la chaîne m'avait prise sur ses genoux et me tripotait le sein droit, et le trouvait visiblement d'une élasticité merveilleuse. A cette époque-là de ma vie les hommes s'étaient tous mis à me trouver d'une élasticité merveilleuse. J'avais pris un peu de poids... et ces deux kilos s'étaient harmonieusement répartis sur toute ma personne, je le voyais dans le miroir... Ma chair était plus ferme, plus lisse, plus rebondie qu'avant. Je vois bien aujourd'hui que cette prise de poids et cette formidable qualité de ma chair ont sans doute été les tout premiers symptômes. (11)

The director of the firm sat me on his lap and pawed at my right breast, obviously finding it marvelously elastic. At that point in my life, men in general had begun finding me marvelously elastic. I'd put on weight... and I could see in the mirror that those pounds had distributed themselves nicely around my figure.... My flesh had become firmer, smoother, plumper than before. Now I understand that this extra weight and the wonderful quality of my flesh must have been the very first symptoms. (3)

This matter-of-fact introduction into the sexual economy of Truie's world, where a "job interview" includes sex as a matter of course, helps explain why increasing piggishness initially makes her seem more, not less, of a woman. Truie is hired as a cosmetics salesgirl/sex worker and develops a fervent following of male clients. At work, as in her daily life, Truie is valued as a sex object, as usable, pleasure-producing flesh. So the earthy carnality of her first symptoms are advantageous to both her personal and professional life: her body becomes more lush and voluptuous, her breasts swell from a B to a D cup, her flesh acquires a pleasing "*pneumatique*" quality (11). The relative normality of this first stage illustrates that in Truie's sex-driven and masculine-dominated world, a certain degree of animality is not only acceptable but titillating in a woman; it can be easily assimilated as a quality of sexiness, nudging but not really stretching the human-animal boundary.

But as her symptoms of piggishness intensify, exotic sexiness gives way to something more unsettling. Unhappy about her increasing weight, Truie begins to feel uncomfortable in

her own body: “J’ai commencé à me dégoûter moi-même. Je me voyais dans la glace et j’avais, pour de bon, des replis à la taille, presque des bourrelets!” (“I began to disgust myself. I’d look in the mirror and see actual folds at my waist, almost rolls of flesh!”; 26; Coverdale 18). The expansion of her flesh, which began as a swelling of her womanly figure, becomes an overall fattening. Even as she diverges from the norm of feminine thinness, though, Truie becomes increasingly irresistible to the men in her life. Her boyfriend Honoré starts insisting on daily sex, and she becomes a star employee as her male clients respond ardently to her newfound animality: “Les clients prenaient des habitudes fermières avec moi... Le lit de massage devenait, sous leurs nouvelles envies, une sorte de meule de foin dans un champ, certains commençaient à braire, d’autres à renifler comme des porcs, et de fil en aiguille ils se mettaient tous, plus ou moins, à quatre pattes” (“The customers gradually fell into barnyard ways with me... Their new inclinations turned the massage table into a sort of haystack out in a field. Some of the clients began to bray, others grunted like pigs, and little by little, most of them wound up on all fours”; 26-27; Coverdale 19). Her increasing nonhumanity, combined with her availability as a sex worker, give them license to indulge their own animal desires, the unconventional acts that, presumably, they reserve for their extra-domestic sexual encounters.

Truie’s sexual success in her second stage suggests that beneath the surface of human sexuality lies a barely repressed bestiality: perhaps sex taps into a wild animality that humans normally disavow in themselves.<sup>21</sup> But bestial sexuality has no utopian promise here: the

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<sup>21</sup> The highly taboo question of bestiality—that is, romantic or sexual relations between humans and animals—resonates provocatively within critical human-animal studies, which is so often concerned with interspecies companionship and love. Kathy Rudy looks at several discursive sites where such conversations play out, mapping the varying social attitudes and ethical/ontological structures involved in the prohibition/promotion of human-animal love. She draws on queer theory to propose that “animal love in various permutations” might “disrupt the stability and superiority of human identity” (611).

womanimal hybrid and her temporarily-animalized clients do not meet on equal terms. A familiar misogyny intrudes on the barnyard scene: Truie's bestiality only registers as attractive as long as she remains passive. As her transformation progresses, she begins (she abashedly admits to her reader) to crave sex. Her work brings pleasure for the first time; her desire is insatiable, and she starts to take the initiative both at work and at home. None of the men, however, appreciate their sex object turning into a desiring subject: customers complain when she gets on top, and after she starts moaning, a disgusted Honoré refuses to touch her. Truie loses status at work: the director, who previously encouraged her bestial attractiveness, now calls her "*une vraie chienne*" ("a real bitch") and "*chatte en chaleur*" ("bitch in heat"; 40-41; Coverdale 32-33).<sup>22</sup>

Finally, in the third stage of her metamorphosis, Truie loses both desire and desirability. Her body becomes animal in a way that reads as slovenly, not sexy—in fact, it becomes specifically hostile to the features of conventional human femininity. Her skin thickens and becomes hypersensitive, breaking out into scaly rashes whenever she tries to apply lotions or makeup. The hair on her head becomes bristly and uncontrollable, and long, tough hairs, impervious to depilation, start growing all over her body. Her formerly eye-catching décolletage transforms into six teats. In her most extreme moments, Truie is physically unable to stand on two legs—her new body is not made for bipedalism—and has trouble remembering the minutiae of human language and culture. After losing her job, her boyfriend, and her home, she retreats from the

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<sup>22</sup> Coverdale translates both "*chienne*" and "*chatte*" as "*bitch*," though "*chatte*" actually refers to a female cat; a more apt translation that holds onto the specific vulgarity of "*chatte en chaleur*" might be "*pussy in heat*." The use of italics, which are strewn throughout Truie's narrative, is notable here. As Sanja Bahun-Radunović argues, Truie's italics are employed strategically as a way to highlight and undermine the patriarchal and/or totalitarian nature of certain socially coded phrases (59). A similar argument is made by some critics about the recurring italics of Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus*. Italicized words might provide evidence that Truie is an ironic narrator of her story, rather than hopelessly complicit with the misogynist norms of her world. Yet the novel, like *Monsieur Venus*, refuses to confirm the precise target, or indeed the existence, of its subtextual irony.

judgment—and the rapaciousness—of human society. For times are tough and meat is scarce; Truie, always attentive to the value of her own body, is well aware that “Au marché noir j’aurais bien fait mes cinq mille euros de kilo, je dis ça sans prétention” (“I’d have brought five thousand euros a pound on the black market, easy, no bones about it”; 121; Coverdale 114). As a pig she is vulnerable to the carnal appetites of not only lecherous men but also humanity in general; at the novel’s end, she narrowly escapes slaughter by her own mercenary mother.

For the duration of Truie’s story, she transitions back and forth between the three stages: voluptuous womanhood with a vague hint of animality; bestial womanhood; and near-complete piggishness. The stage she occupies at a given moment determines how well she is able to function in the human world, whether she is able to “pass” as a normal woman or normal pig, or whether she must negotiate a uniquely hybrid role for herself. But no matter where she falls on the spectrum from woman to pig, Truie exists as a carnal object: a bundle of flesh to be bought and sold (or stolen), consumed, exploited without compunction. In her world, she is seen not as a person but as a commodity—as inert flesh with no agency of its own, as a body that is fucked and/or eaten. Neither a woman nor a pig deserves to be treated as a piece of meat, Adams argues; neither deserves her lowly status as the categorical other of man.

*Truismes*, with its resolutely hybrid narrator and its attention to the specific cruelties meted out against both women and pigs, seems to agree. Like in *Nights at the Circus*, and in contrast to the tradition of humanist feminism, the injustice of the heroine’s situation does not depend on her being “really a human.” Unlike most deployments of the woman-animal trope, here neither female suffering nor animal suffering is reduced to a mere metaphor for the other; as Naama Harel puts it, “the main split in the novel is not between human beings and animals, but



rather between oppressive and oppressed groups, and this division crosses the species barrier” (405). And if that means, as Anat Pick argues, that “Darrieussecq avoids explicitly affirming, under the auspices of universal humanism, women’s dignity and agency, this is because she is out to contest the very inventory of humanism: dignity, autonomy, subjectivity, rationality, morality, and language” (100). The condition of humanity, in this novel, fails to live up to its own lofty ideals.

Truie, in fact, chooses animality over humanity, finally finding peace, autonomy, and a satisfying sex life as a pig, not a woman, at the novel’s conclusion.<sup>23</sup> This *truie* is the one who writes the book, who begs her readers’ compassion and asks them to see her not as meat but as a person worthy of respect, regardless of her species. Surviving a life of trauma, she emerges as the author of her own story; through autobiography, she cautiously intervenes into the misogynist and carnivorous structures that would turn her into passive, dead flesh. In her opening lines, Truie writes: “Je sais à quel point cette histoire pourra semer de trouble et d’angoisse, à quel point elle perturbera de gens... Mais il faut que j’écrive ce livre sans plus tarder” (“I know how much this story might upset people, how much distress and confusion it could cause... But I must write this book without further delay”; 9; Coverdale 1). She knows it is easier, less distressing, for humans to ignore the relationship between animal bodies and meat, between living bodies and the objects they are made to become. But in Truie’s account, meat speaks; the absent referent timidly but insistently re-presents itself. Her story resonates with a combined feminist-animal

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<sup>23</sup> Harel notes that *Truismes* is “among the few metamorphosis tales in which transformation from a human body into an animal body is not described as a catastrophe” (405). The novel offers an alternative to two classic narratives of metamorphosis—the redemption of regaining the human form (as in Homer’s *Odyssey*), and the tragedy of failing to regain the human form (as in Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”). It is thus able to achieve a relatively happy ending on posthumanist terms.

politics that refuses the objectification of both women and animals. A woman, like a pig, like any fleshy body, could become a piece of meat; but a potential piece of meat, Truie reminds us, is also a lively agent with her own story to tell.

### **The hazards of love: Jack and Yvan**

Both Fevvers and Truie face the threat of objectification over and over throughout their lives. In some cases, the stakes of the threat are clear: the would-be objectifier is marked as a villain, the womanimal actively resists and triumphs over the threat. But objectification, in these novels, is not always an unequivocally bad fate. It invites ambivalence, rather than automatic resistance. This ambivalence manifests most strongly in the context of romantic entanglements that are both heterosexual and “hetero-species,” occurring between partners who are different human and/or animal kinds. Each woman pursues a relationship with a man who embodies the specific threat against her. Fevvers is besotted with Jack Walser, the reporter whose mission is to debunk her mythology and turn her into his own story. Truie falls for Yvan, the handsome director of a cosmetics company who turns out to be a werewolf, in thrall to his carnivorous appetite every full moon. These two pairings are given special status: amidst a series of disastrous and dangerous liaisons between our heroines and the men who seek to possess them, Jack and Yvan are presented as genuine lovers to their respective partners. Yet neither love story is free from the familiar threats of objectification that Fevvers and Truie must resist for their own survival. The questions posed by these novels are whether these partnerships work, and what it would take for them to do so. Is it possible to forge a relationship between a human and an animal, between

a man and a woman, that is not overdetermined by the interlocking patterns of domination that tend to characterize such encounters? Finally, and most radically, Carter and Darrieussecq ask, might there be something positive in being objectified, in submitting oneself as an object for another's use? With this final question, the novels intervene most strongly into humanist-feminist arguments against objectification. While those arguments assert that a woman is a proper subject, not an object—rational, autonomous, and fully *human*—Carter and Darrieussecq are not so sure, throwing doubt onto not only the plausibility of the premise, but its capacity to yield interest, desire, and pleasure for women and other kinds of beings.

**“Think of him as an amanuensis”: co-authoring a love story**

From the very first page of *Nights at the Circus*, which opens *in medias res* backstage at London's Alhambra Theatre, the relationship between Jack Walser and Fevvers is set up as a mutual challenge, a face-off between two rival storytellers clamoring for the final word. The story they are fighting to tell is the story of Fevvers herself. Her version is that she is a genuine hybrid, endowed with fully functional wings thanks to her avian paternity; but even as she insists on the truth of her monstrous anatomy, Fevvers also leaves room for ambiguity in her story. Her slogan “Is she fact or is she fiction?” capitalizes on both the public's desire to believe in a magical anomaly, and the profitable notoriety that comes with controversy: her massive star appeal rests on the believers as well as the doubters, who keep the conversation alive.

This ambiguity is precisely Jack's target. A young American journalist, Jack has traveled the far reaches of the globe, chasing the thrill of adventure and filing occasional copy to a New York newspaper. His defining quality, both personal and professional, is a cool, rational

skepticism—“the privileged irresponsibility of the journalist, the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing” (10). And he refuses to believe in the myth of Fevvers. In London, Jack is taking a break from war reportage to try his hand at a human interest story, but with his own private motivations: “Walser is here, ostensibly, to ‘puff’ her; and, if it is humanly possible, to explode her, either as well as, or instead of” (11). In triumphant defiance of her deception, he imagines, he will turn the woman and her autobiography into raw material for his own exposé, exploding her story and building his own out of the disassembled fragments.<sup>24</sup>

So as he sits in Fevvers’s dressing room, dutifully filling up the pages of his notepad with the details of her life story, occasionally injecting a question into her long monologues, Jack’s intention is not to faithfully reproduce his subject’s story, but to debunk it. He takes down Fevvers’s tale in order to rewrite it from the perspective of one who is not easily fooled, who can distinguish fact from fiction and knows the former to be incomparably more valuable than the latter. Viewing Fevvers’s winged trapeze performance before the interview, Jack recalls the series of wonders he has seen, and confidently disproved, around the world; like the levitating Kathmandu fakir and the vanishing Calcutta magician, he thinks, Fevvers’s flight is just another trick.<sup>25</sup> On his ever-present notepad, he observes that “She tries too damn’ hard” and sums up

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<sup>24</sup> Jack’s initial approach to Fevvers exemplifies the typical gendered dynamics of authorship explored in Chapters 1 and 2, according to which a masculine author dissects and effaces the feminine body/text in order to inscribe his own meaning upon her/it. Fevvers proves a more recalcitrant “text,” and a more forceful counter-author, than either Jacques Silvert in *Monsieur Vénus* or any of the women examined in Chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> Notably, the objects of his disbelief are also racial and colonial others from his cosmopolitan, white, Western point of view, and in some ways, Fevvers is grouped alongside them. In her intersectional analysis of the novel, Erin Douglas emphasizes its positioning of Fevvers as a global other in terms of species and gender as well as race, class, and colonial power dynamics. As a member of Colonel Kearney’s Imperial Circus, she joins a long tradition of the visual exhibition of colonized bodies as freak show spectacles; Douglas emphasizes that Fevvers’s status as “Cockney bred and born” places her outside normative categories of British citizenship (Douglas 10-12). At the same time, as a white woman, Fevvers clearly maintains some degree of racial privilege. She is the top-billed star of the circus, not to mention the novel itself; the characters marked as non-white tend to play merely supporting roles (such as the strong but silent Princess of Abyssinia, the tiger tamer) or antagonistic ones (such as the shifty, vaguely “Latin” Charivari acrobats and the predatory Siberian Shaman). In this regard, *Nights at the Circus* invites a critique that might be

the spectacle as the familiar product of “Mass hysteria and the delusion of crowds... a little primitive technology and a big dose of the will to believe” (16). Gazing intently at Fevvers’s unusual anatomy as she somersaults through the air, Jack feels his skepticism vindicated by both common sense and science, for the winged woman, contradicting “all the laws of evolution and human reason,” has biologically superfluous human arms— “the impossible made doubly unlikely—the impossible squared. Yes, sir!” (15).<sup>26</sup> She is no marvel, no womanimal hybrid, simply a run-of-the-mill human huckster.

Yet face to face with his subject, Jack finds this skeptical certainty much more difficult to maintain. If Jack intends to dispute her authenticity, Fevvers is ready for the challenge. Their interview unfolds as a subtle, protracted battle: the tone is set from the first page as Fevvers claims to Jack, in her “voice that clanged like dustbin lids,” that she was not born but hatched: “The blonde guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter with his open notebook and his poised pencil, as if to dare him: ‘Believe it or not!’” (7). If Jack’s weapons in this interview-cum-battle are the operations of order—reason, skepticism, confidence in the truth, and professional authority—then Fevvers’s are the forces of disorder—excess, chaos, confusion. In the lines above, disorder emerges in her clanging voice, her uproarious guffaw, her careless *deshabille*, and her implicit challenge: believe it or not, she dares Jack, but your belief has no

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lodged against Angela Carter’s work as a whole: by drawing so heavily on white European aesthetic traditions, Carter runs the risk of reducing people of color to exotic background decor or fetish objects. In this case, by situating both Fevvers and most of her would-be appropriators as white and Western, the novel fails to connect race to its analysis of gender- and species-based objectification.

<sup>26</sup> Jack’s observation recalls another moment, described in Chapter 2, where a woman’s authenticity is judged in relation to her arms: in *L’Eve future*, Ewald is horrified at his beloved Alicia’s response to the statue of Venus de Milo, who resembles her exactly except “I have my arms!” For both Jack and Ewald, the woman’s arms serve as an indisputable signifier of her failure to be what she claims to be (in Fevvers’s case) or what he desires her to be (in Alicia’s).

bearing on *my* story. The turmoil she invokes, through her presence in the room and the story she tells, gradually ruffles, then topples, Jack's composure. Her huge and willfully visible body, her raucous voice, her persistent and highly personal smell, her intimate garments strewn willy-nilly about the room, all combine to infect the space with Fevvers-ness: this is occupied territory, and Jack has no ground to stand on, literally—he cannot turn around without hitting his head on the iron mantelpiece or dislodging a bouquet of silk stockings.

Surrounded by such insistently feminine chaos, the rational reporter who came to “explode” his subject finds himself constantly on the defensive, trying to fend off the glasses of champagne Fevvers keeps pouring him but growing increasingly disoriented nonetheless. He came to establish the “fact” that Fevvers is “fiction”: but true to her slogan, Fevvers uses the interview as a means of cultivating ambiguity, insisting on the truth of her report, but simultaneously turning the encounter into a space where fact and fiction, along with all other orderly distinctions, are inextricably blurred. And though Jack is the one with the pen, the professional writer who has been authorized (by his employer and his interviewee) to tell the story, he finds his assurance of mastery slipping away as the night goes on. Fevvers's recollections, characteristically excessive, fill his notebook to the brim. Jack tries to pinpoint concrete truths that might anchor the story and render it publishable, but its very outlandishness makes even the checkable facts suspect—Fevvers claims, for instance, that her life story has crisscrossed with famous heiresses and influential politicians whose names, he knows, cannot possibly be printed in his article. His doubts about her veracity are swallowed by the infectious power of the narrative; his authorial faculties diminish as he finds himself completely in thrall to her story, down to his very writing hand: “Walser did indeed feel himself at the point of prostration. The

hand that followed their dictations across the page obediently as a little dog no longer felt as if it belonged to him. It flapped at the hinge of the wrist” (78).<sup>27</sup>

The end of the interview does not conclude their relationship, nor the ongoing battle over who gets to tell the story of Fevvers. The authorial stakes are raised when what starts for each of them as an everyday professional obligation turns into a tumultuous romance. Jack pursues Fevvers on tour under the guise of developing his piece into an extended treatment of the circus itself, but his personal and professional motivations are hopelessly entangled: he wants to write Fevvers not just as a marvelous freak, or even as a fraud, but as the woman who will be his wife. He begins his research intending to debunk her; he ends the novel intending to wed her. In both cases, his mode of operation is to impose his own tidy narrative on the recalcitrant mess of uncertainty she embodies. Fevvers, of course, has no intention of being rewritten; her resistance to the imposition of oppressive masculine narratives is well established at every turn of her unusual life; but she does want Jack, despite the fact that he, the debunking author, represents the oppressive masculine narrative *par excellence*. The final section of the novel is preoccupied with the question of the plausibility and mutual satisfaction of such a match. Can Jack and Fevvers become true collaborators, co-authors of her story? Or does their love threaten to domesticate her—to strip her of her mythic strangeness, turn her from a feral freak into a dutiful wife and thus stifle the power of her self-authored hybridity?

During a long period of separation between the lovers, Fevvers and Lizzie hash out

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<sup>27</sup> See Gustar for a complex analysis of the dynamics of authorship in the novel. Gustar links Fevvers to Cassandra, a prophet of Greek myth whose prophecies were always true, but never believed; in Gustar’s genealogy, Cassandra is a figure of contestatory feminine voice and postmodern resistance to narrative closure. For both Jack and the reader, “Fevvers represents a Cassandrian narrator *extraordinaire*; we cannot definitively determine the truth of her narration, for she admits to telling both truths and lies” (347); by telling her own story, she powerfully refuses her own objectification or clarification.

these questions in an unresolved debate. Fevvers, besotted with Jack, believes that they can break new ground with their union, forging an equal partnership that has nothing to do with existing gender relations. But Lizzie, the hardline anarcho-feminist, remains skeptical about the possibility of non-patriarchal heterosexual romance. The patterns, she believes, are too well established to be tweaked. “Don’t you know the customary endings...? True lovers’ reunions always end in a marriage” (280), Lizzie insists, and marriage, in the eyes of both mother and daughter, represents the worst kind of trap for a woman. As a wife, a woman becomes no more than her husband’s property, far worse off than the prostitute, who at least retains ownership of the body she rents out.<sup>28</sup>

“The name of this custom is a ‘happy ending’” (281), continues Lizzie, casting Fevvers’s situation in literary terms in an implicit gesture toward Carter’s novel itself. Both Carter the author and Fevvers the character grapple with the question of how “happy,” conventional, and orderly they want their endings to be; neither arrives at a clear resolution. Fevvers imagines her future with Jack in textual terms; but in her fantasy version of their love, the man who serves as “author” is not necessarily the one in charge of the story. As she puts it to a skeptical Lizzie:

Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis... Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we’ve yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they’d never been so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow. (285)

Here, Fevvers calls upon an ancient theory of authorship quite distinct from Jack’s vision of himself as the masterful wordsmith. The title of “amanuensis” dates back to the Roman Empire,

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<sup>28</sup> The women’s discussion of marriage reflects a preoccupation with the topic in both dominant and feminist discourses of the *fin de siècle*. As Ledger points out, opposition to marriage was one of the characteristic attributes of the New Woman, at least in the fearful popular imagination; she was imagined as a careless libertine, rejecting family in search of wanton pleasure (and threatening the fabric of society as a result). In fact, many feminists of the time advocated for the reform, not the overthrow, of marriage as an institution (20-23).



naming a trusted personal secretary who performs an important service but is a clear subordinate. Reframed as amanuensis, rather than author, the man who holds the pen is the story's servant, not its master; he is a medium, submitting himself as an instrument of inscription so that the story might be preserved, but he is not its creator. Fevvers imagines her beloved as amanuensis to make a specifically feminist intervention in a relation traditionally enacted between men: his professional credentials enable him to tell the stories that usually go unheard, to amplify the female voices that tend to be repressed by master narratives of history. Jack's writing, in her fantasy, will center not on him but on his disenfranchised subjects, and will thus redistribute authority in accordance with a new era of gender equality. The ancient idea of the author as subordinate thus serves Fevvers as a rebuke to the modern conventions of gendered authorial power that Jack imposes on their relationship.<sup>29</sup>

But will Jack submit to being his lover's amanuensis, ceding his own narrative authority in favor of her own? In the short "Envoi" that concludes the novel, the question is left open. The lovers have reunited, the danger has passed—but what is the nature of Jack and Fevvers's "happy ending"? Jack waits in bed while Fevvers freshens up before their first sexual encounter, flexing his journalistic muscles by reporting the story of himself—though in a manner that diverges considerably from Fevvers's vision:

‘I am Jack Walser, an American citizen. I joined the circus of Colonel Kearney in order to delight my reading public with accounts of a few nights at the circus... (What a story!) I was derailed by brigands in Transbaikalia and lived as a wizard

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<sup>29</sup> The amanuensis tradition that Fevvers cites here names an author in service to another person. Other ancient theories of authorship name a more profound subordination of the author, who is imagined as the vessel of divine inspiration. Plato describes the production of poetry as a passive act of being possessed, rather than an active act of craftsmanship. In his account, inspiration flows from gods and muses to poets, who transmit it through their work to spectators; the process is likened to the flow of magnetism from a lodestone through a chain of metal rings bound by attractive forces. “The poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each one possessed by the divinity to whom he is in bondage” (220); authorship is thus a form of metaphysical slavery, rather than a mark of individual genius.

among the natives for a while. (God, what a story!) Let me introduce my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser, who formerly had a successful career on the music-hall stage under the name of—

‘Oh!’ (293-294)

The man who tells this story is no amanuensis. In fact, the passage strongly recalls the Jack of the novel’s beginning, the rational reporter intent to impose a tidy narrative onto the world’s distressing chaos. In this telling, Jack is the author and the hero, in awe of his own exploits—“God, what a story!” Fevvers features in a distinctly second-class role: she is not only claimed as Jack’s wife (a prospect she earlier disdained), but renamed (“Mrs Sophie Walser”) and, crucially, retired, her “former” career fantasized as a fond but distant memory.<sup>30</sup> Here is the trap of the “happy ending” that Lizzie feared for her daughter: the independent woman domesticated by marriage into a passive piece of property, a mere footnote in her husband’s story.

But this story is not the final version, for it gets interrupted (— “Oh!”) by Fevvers’s return and the lovers’ first embrace (which occurs, fortuitously, at midnight, the exact turn of the new century). After sex, Jack reports a revision of the tale:

‘Jack, ever an adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her. He got himself into scrape after scrape... All that seemed to happen to me in the third person as though, most of my life, I watched it but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again.’ (294)

In this version, which switches between third and first person, Jack seems to repudiate the confident authorial “I” of the previous one. The story is no longer about a bold hero doing things, but a man to whom things are done—and most importantly, a man whose self is partly constituted via the woman he loves, the one who molds his putty and hatches him from his egg. Here he

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<sup>30</sup> “Sophie” is indeed Fevvers’s legal name, but only her true intimates, such as Lizzie, are permitted to call her by it, and the novel notes that Jack has not yet earned that privilege.

admits, finally, to uncertainty: in his relationship with Fevvers (no longer cast as his wife), he must “start all over again,” forge a new self. Whether he can do so without drawing on the old patterns of man and woman, husband and wife, human and animal, author and text—whether he can truly be the New Man to Fevvers’s New Woman—remains to be seen, for the novel ends with the lovers in bed, their new life ahead of them.

The quick change from Jack’s first version to his second might invite skepticism on the part of the reader. Can Jack really relinquish the desire for “my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser” so quickly? Is it only through sex that Fevvers can convince him to change his plot and rewrite their story into a duet? Can the two of them fashion a heterosexual romance free from the forces of domestication, allowing Fevvers to remain a freak and an animal as well as a woman and a wife? The novel ends on a note of undeniable joy for the lovers; but Lizzie’s cynical deconstruction of the “happy ending” motif echoes as a cautious reminder of the ways this partnership could sour. As Lizzie herself might say to the conclusion of Carter’s novel, “It’s going to be more complicated than that” (286).

But for Fevvers, the risk of partnering with Jack, of trusting him to write her story faithfully, is a necessary one, and not simply because she is in love with him. For while she defines herself politically as the independent New Woman, Fevvers is anything but autonomous in a more radical, even ontological sense. She depends upon the fascinated gaze of the observer in order to feel truly herself; without “the eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was” (290), she fades into obscurity.<sup>31</sup> It is, finally, a particular form

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<sup>31</sup> Fevvers’s dependence on the gaze of others recalls Freud’s distinction between two types of object-love. Anacletic love (characteristic of men) occurs through the transference of one’s primary narcissism to another. Narcissistic love (characteristic of women) constitutes a failure to progress from that originary narcissism; “it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man’s love for them. Nor does their need lie in the

of objectification that she requires, but on her own terms: she submits herself as a spectacular object, a meaningful text, for the world to ponder and interpret, to marvel at, though never to fully possess. She is a performer who needs an audience, a story who needs a reader—and a writer, or at least a scribe. Inviting Jack’s authorship might lead in one of two directions: in the mode of intrepid reporter, he threatens to debunk and overwrite her; but in the more generous mode of amanuensis he promises to immortalize her, inscribing her and her fellow freaks into the annals of history. As woman, as animal, as monster, Fevvers well knows the danger of letting someone else write her story, but she also recognizes the power of letting herself be not a solo artist but a collaborative work.

### **“A lovely way to die”: love as consumption**

*Truismes* depicts a world that is, for the most part, organized and controlled by men, and the most notable motif of Truie’s life story is that she suffers at the hands of one man after another. A lecherous boss, a horde of demanding clients, a heartless boyfriend, a sadistic gynecologist, an exploitative politician—with very few exceptions, the male characters in this book, no matter their status, use their encounters with Truie to bolster their own power by demeaning and abusing her. In her own account, her relationship with Yvan is something different: a true love and partnership, rather than an exploitative transaction.<sup>32</sup> Yet their union is haunted by an unusual problem: his

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direction of loving, but of being loved” (89). This feminine tendency toward narcissism is shared, Freud muses, by cats and large beasts of prey—another way in which women tend toward the nonhuman. That Fevvers is a narcissist, the novel makes abundantly clear. But the novel suggests that she invites the gaze of others not solely as a narcissist, but as a collaborator, telling the story of herself along with the participation of her audience.

<sup>32</sup> Besides Yvan, there are two other exceptions that bear mentioning, both of which involve a man of color—notable in a book that features an undercurrent of (ambiguously ironic) racist discourse. Truie has a mutually fulfilling, long-standing relationship with a rich African marabout, who tries to help her recover from her transformation. She also finds temporary respite in a sexual relationship with a kind Arab man who works as a housekeeper at the hotel where she is staying. Both of these men suffer ambiguous fates (deportation and/or assassination) as the political

recurring desire to eat her. Every full moon, Yvan turns into a wolf with an irrepressible appetite for meat; at these times he recognizes his lover only as potential prey. One might expect Truie to run far away from a being who concretely embodies the general masculine desire to consume her. But on their very first date (a moonlight walk on the Seine gone awry when Yvan transforms), watching the wolf-man kill and eat a passerby, Truie is smitten: “Je suis tombée raide dingue amoureuse d’Yvan” (“I fell stark raving madly in love with Yvan”; Coverdale 119).<sup>33</sup>

For it is not the difference of predator versus prey that registers most strongly for Truie, but the kinship of two animal hybrids. After Yvan has eaten his fill, she can safely approach him, and her account of their first embrace is the most tender, mutual, and specific description of physical romance in a novel filled with vague salaciousness:

J’ai pris le cou d’Yvan entre mes bras et je l’ai embrassé au creux des deux oreilles, c’était doux, c’était chaud. Yvan s’est roulé sur le sol et je l’ai gratté sous le poitrail et je me suis couchée sur lui pour profiter de sa bonne odeur. Je l’ai embrassé dans le cou, je l’ai embrassé au coin de la gueule, je lui ai léché les dents, je lui ai mordu la langue... Ensuite Yvan s’est assis sur son derrière et je me suis couchée entre ses pattes. (126-127)

I wrapped my arms around Yvan’s neck and kissed him inside each ear: it was soft, it was warm. Yvan rolled on the ground and I scratched him below his breastbone. I lay down on him to enjoy his fine smell. I kissed him on the neck, I kissed him on the corner of his mouth, I licked his teeth, I bit his tongue... Then Yvan sat on his rump and I lay down between his paws. (119)

At this moment, Truie is in woman form, Yvan fully a wolf, but both are able to access the full potential for pleasure that might emerge from hybridity. Their embrace is grounded in

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atmosphere grows increasingly despotic and racial minorities come under attack. Truie often voices the racism that seems to hold sway in this fictional version of France, but it is difficult to tell whether she sincerely believes, or is subtly mocking, this dominant discourse.

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it appears that Yvan might have been planning to eat her, given that he invites her on a dinner date on the full moon, but changes his mind, telling her to run away when his transformation begins. In this case, perhaps, he sees her first as a meat object and later as a love object—still maintaining the continuity between different forms of feminine carnality that recurs in this novel, but from the opposite direction.

more-than-human sensuality; scratching, smelling, licking, biting, and kissing, they approach each other as desiring bodies with an intimacy that transcends species boundaries. This passage recalls Truie's previous "barnyard" experiences with men animalized by desire, but (ironically, given that Yvan is a literal predator) lacks the predatory power dynamic of the unscrupulous massage parlor. In this instance, a human woman and a male wolf can meet on equal terms, without resorting to the logics of gender- and species-based domination that plague Truie throughout this book. Theirs is not exactly a love between a woman and a man, nor between a female animal and a male; it is essential to their relationship that both straddle the boundary between human and animal, that neither can claim full membership in the ranks of rational, autonomous humanity.

However, hybridity does not guarantee equality between the pig-woman and the wolf-man. The egalitarian promise of their shared sense of nonhumanity is complicated by several factors that haunt this otherwise rosy love story. Yvan is privileged by both gender and class; Truie learns that, in contrast to her own impoverished upbringing, the handsome CEO has enjoyed a life of wealth and ease.<sup>34</sup> This social prestige seems to condition Yvan's experience of humanness. When he claims to Truie that all it takes is willpower to master one's metamorphoses, Yvan echoes a classic neoliberal narrative of individual self-determination that ignores the material factors contributing to his personal success. He tries to teach Truie his tips for self-control, but they do not work as well for her, which Yvan attributes to her hormone swings and the general chaos of femininity—Truie notes (perhaps lovingly, perhaps ironically) that "les femelles il ne connaissait pas trop le problème" ("he didn't know all that much about female matters"; 128-129;

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<sup>34</sup> Their class difference later provokes a heated argument. "Yvan wasn't putting himself in my place: my father, mother, and I, we'd lived in those lousy housing projects in Garenne-le-Mouillé for years and years—he had no idea what it was like" (Coverdale 133-134). The quarrel, though brief, is notable as one of the rare moments in the novel where Truie expresses a firm opinion that contradicts a male character.

Coverdale 121). Crediting himself with a self-control that in fact neither Truie nor he can actually achieve, Yvan reveals his attachment to some familiar humanist and sexist discourses; he does not completely acknowledge either the specificity of her difficult position as a womanimal, nor the full implications of his own nonhumanity.

Yet Truie chooses to focus on the positive side of their relationship: the excitement of being deeply in love, as well as the exhilarating freedom of being with a partner who at least partly shares her hybrid experience of the world. In their best moments, Truie and Yvan exploit hybridity to dodge the hierarchies (man over woman, human over animal, eating subject over eaten object) that might otherwise overdetermine their relationship. Structures of domestication can be strategically invoked, precisely because their species roles are unfixed: they take turns being, or appearing to be, the “human” in charge of their “pet.” When Truie is in pig form, Yvan (well known in the press for his eccentricities) walks her on a leash with a diamond collar; when Yvan is in wolf form, “si des gens passaient ils pourraient toujours croire à mon chien, un très gros chien. Ça me faisait sourire cette idée, ça m’attendrissait” (“any passersby might very well think he was my dog, a great big dog. That idea made me smile, filled me with tender feelings; 127; Coverdale 120). Even the moments that read, to an anthropocentric public, as familiar expressions of human dominion are experienced by Yvan and Truie as tender, loving, and, unlike conventional pet relationships, completely voluntary.

The two work out a system to manage their metamorphic state. They live hidden away in a Paris apartment; Yvan orders black-market fruit and vegetables off the Internet for Truie and ventures out onto the quays once a month to snatch a passing stranger for his own meal. Truie is unperturbed by her lover’s murders, secure in the knowledge that she is more than meat to him.

But times get tough after another political takeover; the new police state starts to crack down on street crime and Yvan, afraid to go on the hunt, tries to wait out a full moon at home. As his lupine side takes over, Yvan becomes increasingly agitated. Rather than flee, Truie tries to talk him down, but at the moon's zenith, she contemplates her own end:

Yvan s'est relevé d'un coup. Il a entendu le bourdonnement du sang dans mes artères, il a senti l'odeur des muscles sous ma peau, il a vu battre mes carotides juste sous la peau de mon cou. Ses iris jaunes se sont fendus en deux. Sa voix s'est déchiré en un long hurlement et il a contracté tous ses muscles pour prendre son élan... "*Bon*," je me suis dit, "*c'est une belle mort*." (137)

Yvan sprang up. He heard the blood humming in my veins, smelled the flesh beneath my skin, saw the carotid artery pulsing in my neck. His yellow irises split in two, and letting out a great howl, he crouched to spring... Well, I thought, it's a lovely way to die. (130)

This moment poses one of the greatest challenges to a feminist reading of Truie's tale. Here, Truie demonstrates no resistance to the prospect of becoming her lover's meat. Under his hungry gaze, she feels herself reduced from a person to parts, to drinkable blood and edible flesh. The logic of gender- and species-based domination, which the partners previously treated as amusingly flexible, here imposes itself as a fatal barrier to their love. They are both animal hybrids, but he is a wolf and a man, she a pig and a woman; a familiar script determines this gendered interspecies encounter. Yet Truie represents herself as a willing victim. Does her inaction represent an internalization of the misogynist, speciesist system that declares her no more than a carnal object? Or might she really believe that being eaten by her lover would constitute "une belle mort"?

Truie is, by and large, an infuriatingly passive narrator of her own story. Only rarely does she register any protest to the near-continuous masculine abuse that constitutes her daily life; in fact, she regularly expresses gratitude toward her abusers, calls them nice, charming, cute. There is definite irony in the sexual discourse of this novel, but whether the irony is Truie's or



Darrieussecq's alone is unclear. Is Truie fully complicit with the misogyny that rules her world, unable to see outside of it? Or is she, the halting, cloven-hoofed autobiographer, writing her entire account in a dryly ironic mode? In either case, the episode with Yvan is characterized by a heartfelt sincerity: Truie calls their romance "la plus belle période de ma vie" ("the most wonderful period of my life"; 128; Coverdale 121) and even as she relishes her new piggy life at the novel's end, she still longs for her lost love. What would it mean to extend that presumption of sincerity to her idea of "une belle mort"?<sup>35</sup>

Under dire circumstances, Truie seems to suggest, it might be good not only to die for Yvan, but to be eaten by him—not because a man inevitably consumes a woman, or because a wolf inevitably consumes a pig, but because they love each other, and true love, perhaps, engenders its own form of consumption that serves as a direct counterpoint to those gender and species conventions. The deepest kind of love, Truie suggests, does not occur between autonomous subjects, for if one insists on being fully one's own, one misses out on the intense connection of giving oneself to the other. In its purest form, love is itself a kind of consuming and being consumed, a mutual submission of one's self to the beloved. Becoming her lover's meat represents for Truie the ultimate literalization of this ideal—to be incorporated into the other, to nourish him in an intimate act of material and spiritual unification.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Une belle mort" resonates interestingly with "la petite mort" ("the little death"), which refers in both French and English to orgasm. It would be a stretch to read Truie's barely-averted "belle mort" as an orgasmic experience, but the echo between the two phrases testifies to a connection between loving and dying that helps make sense of her willingness to self-sacrifice.

<sup>36</sup> This notion of material and spiritual incorporation of the other forms the basis, for instance, of a critical approach to anthropophagy (often deployed in early modern colonial discourses as a trope of European anxiety about New World peoples). Following Jacques Derrida's articulation of the sacrificial structure of flesh-eating ("Eating Well"), Carla Freccero traces the valorization of "spiritualized anthropophagy" in the essays of Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne, fascinated by colonial reports from abroad, figures cannibalism as a noble communion, by which "eating the other and being eaten by him form the basis of the most lofty intersubjective communication between men, or rather, of subjectivity itself" (Freccero "Cannibalism" 79). Truie's "belle mort" echoes that sense of eating as a

Of course, Yvan's consumption could be understood as simple killing—murder from a human point of view, predation from an animal point of love, but certainly not an act of love. In this case, Truie's willingness to die would serve as evidence of hopeless passivity, not radical agency. But this peculiar hybrid pair evokes the radical potential of nonhuman love—love that flows into, out of, and around the borders that determine who counts as a proper subject. Truie and Yvan are not immune to the power structures that give men free rein over women, and humans over animals, yet at their best moments, neither are they bound to them. And there is something about Yvan's death—in wolf form, he is shot, stuffed, and put on display at the Museum of Natural History—that illustrates this flexibility, though in a tragic mode. It is he, after all, who falls prey to the violence of objectification; she survives. And in a reversal of the gesture by which she would become his meat, he has become part of her—his loss has been incorporated into her very being.

Je n'ai pas pu oublier Yvan. A chaque Lune il réapparaît dans le ciel, à chaque Lune pleine comme un ventre je retombe dans la douleur de mon amour pour Yvan, à chaque Lune la truie se redresse sur ses pattes et pleure. C'est pour ça que j'écris, c'est parce que je reste moi avec ma douleur d'Yvan. (150)

I haven't been able to forget Yvan. With each Moon, he reappears in the sky; with each full Moon as round as a belly, I sink back into the pain of my love for Yvan; with each Moon, the sow rises to her feet and weeps. That's why I write: it's because I remain myself through my sorrow over Yvan. (143)

One would normally call this grief-stricken attachment to the memory of a loved one a metaphorical incorporation, in contrast to the bloodily material incorporation of the beloved threatened by Yvan.<sup>37</sup> But Truie collapses that distinction: her love for Yvan is an embodied state of being,

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communion of intimates, rather than the indifferent consumption of one by the other; it also resituates the act within the structure of heterosexual romance rather than that of homosexual/homosocial relations between men.

<sup>37</sup> This discussion of metaphorical and material incorporation recalls another scene of wolfish incorporation: Nicolas Abraham's and Maria Torok's analysis of Freud's famous patient the Wolf Man. In Abraham and Torok's

the way she remains herself. It manifests as her continued commitment to hybridity, reminding her to affirm her position teetering on the fence between human and animal worlds rather than dropping onto the relative security of either side. For, she says, it is the memory of her lost love that inspires her to write her story even as she lives happily among pigs, to clutch the pen between her hooves and inscribe her “écriture du cochon” (10) onto a mud-splattered page. As author of her own tale, Truie finally resists the attempts of a carnivorous world to turn her into meat; yet she, like Fevvers in her optimistic moments, believes writing to be a collaborative act. Incorporating her beloved into her hybrid self, transmuting her grief into authorship, Truie salvages Yvan’s tragic end into its own kind of “belle mort.”

### **Monstrous appetites: eating as resistance**

In stories haunted by the lurking threat of being consumed (whether metaphorically or literally), it is fitting that so much attention is paid to the details of our heroines as consumers. Both Truie and Fevvers demonstrate themselves to be women of remarkable appetite; what, how, and how much they eat are matters of intense scrutiny in the texts. Neither one eats in a manner deemed appropriate for a human woman: Fevvers consumes in improperly large quantities, while Truie hungers for material that cannot properly be called food. The novels’ emphasis on the

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account, the Wolf Man case is structured around the psychopathology of incorporation: the self’s identification with a lost object through the pretense that the object is alive inside the self (in contrast to introjection, the appropriation of an object into the self in order to love it). The fantasy of incorporation, Derrida writes in his foreword to the book, “actually introduces an *object* into the body. But the fantasy involves eating the object (through the mouth or otherwise) in order *not* to introject it, in order to vomit it, in a way, into the inside, into the pocket of a cyst. The metaphor is taken *literally* in order to refuse its introjective effectiveness” (“Foreword” xxxviii). The Wolf Man, Abraham and Torok theorize, was trapped by a tendency to incorporate others (such as his sister, father, mother, and therapist) into himself. Truie, however, theorizes incorporation as a structure of intimacy binding herself to Yvan. The process of keeping Yvan’s memory “alive” inside her might represent a pathological failure to mourn in the terms laid out by Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia.” But Truie valorizes her melancholia as a form of intersubjective collaboration; it is the foundation of both her writing and her continued survival.

monstrosity of their consumption habits reveal eating to be a highly charged site of regulation, where restrictive species and gender norms are encoded into the seemingly innocuous guidelines of “table manners.”<sup>38</sup> As monstrous eaters, these womanimals are judged (whether by onlookers or by themselves) as not just improper women, but improper humans. But like other modes of their freakish impropriety, their unseemly eating has a liberating effect, freeing them from the constraints placed on human female bodies. In this regard, Carter’s Sadeian rule might be adjusted: a free womanimal in an unfree society will have, and relish, a monstrous appetite.

Fevvers’s healthy appetite is one of her defining qualities. Like her tremendous size and unearthly wings, her appetite marks her difference from socially prescribed norms of femininity. The late nineteenth century, Abigail Dennis notes, promoted a “cult of feminine enfeeblement and self-starvation,” particularly for upper- and middle-class women (124). Just as Fevvers refuses to submit to patriarchal restrictions on her freedom as a single woman, she refuses to starve in the name of feminine delicacy. Satisfying her ample appetite is thus both a bodily necessity and an act of defiance against dominant discourses of womanhood. Indeed, Fevvers knows how to deploy eating as a weapon: “an old hand at seduction dinners” (171), she can eat and drink any suitor under the table, enjoying herself at his expense while steadfastly refusing to provide the sexual gratification he expects in return. During their interview, Fevvers incorporates her monstrous appetite into a comprehensive sensory assault on Jack, whose professional composure is gradually overwhelmed by the outlandishness of Fevvers’s story as well as her exaggeratedly

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Sceats emphasizes this point when she traces the (often highly gendered) motif of appetite across Angela Carter’s work. “In revealing appetite and eating as a locus of vigorously exercised power relations, [Carter]... disallows the perception of eating as simply an autonomous, politically neutral activity. While hunger may be physically dictated, appetite comes not simply from inside; it is as much culturally constructed and as subject to external constraints and forces as is sexuality” (102).

embodied presence: her voice, scent, wardrobe, and gestures all combine into a disturbingly intoxicating spectacle. As Dennis points out, the *aerialiste* treats eating as just another part of her act: she is an “artiste of appetite” (120), ostentatiously performing her hunger and its satiation with Jack as her captive audience.

She tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies’ fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety... At last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched. She gave him another queer look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of her gluttony would drive him away. (22)

This passage vividly conjures a gloriously grotesque body, the figure of unruly anatomical openness described by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>39</sup> The grotesque body celebrates earthiness, physicality, and the socially defined “low” as a way to invert and/or subvert repressive hierarchies. Fevvers’s meal is defined by an excessiveness of scale and gesture; sloppy table manners, combined with the sheer quantity of food consumed, make her a willfully improper eater. Furthermore, in her voraciousness, Fevvers eats more like an animal than a human woman. The winged woman is no ethereal angel who “eats like a bird,” as the saying goes, but a large, weighty, hungry body.<sup>40</sup>

The passage conveys Fevvers’s unabashed joy in satisfying her bodily needs, but also suggests the performative quality of this meal. With every bite and belch, she announces to the man watching her that she is a proudly monstrous eater, who will not be tamed by dining etiquette nor prescriptions of womanly daintiness. Choosing monstrosity over politesse, Fevvers

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<sup>39</sup> Bakhtin theorizes the grotesque in relation to the ribald writings of Rabelais. The adjective “gargantuan” in this passage specifically links Fevvers and her unusually large body to Gargantua, Rabelais’s insatiably hungry giant, and thus pushes her consumption toward the realm of the fantastic as well as the nonhuman.

<sup>40</sup> In an entirely different register, Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* also plays with the dynamics of this saying. “You eat like a bird,” Norman Bates says shyly to Marion Crane (a woman named for a bird), shortly before brutally murdering her. Even though, as Norman himself admits, the saying is false—birds eat a large amount relative to their body weight—it serves him in the moment as a way to enforce Marion’s passivity and vulnerability, likening her to the avian taxidermy that dominates the room in which they sit.

uses appetite to express a politics of gender, class, and species. She relishes the hunger that is specifically forbidden by the rules of upper-class human femininity, deliberately placing herself outside proper gender- and species-being—for at the table, it is far more satisfying to be a monster than a lady.

For Truie, in the throes of a baffling metamorphosis, changes in appetite provide some of the strongest, least ignorable evidence of her increasing animality. In her case it is not how much she eats, but what kind of food, that makes her an improper eater. Unlike Fevvers, Truie has no fascinated onlooker to her eating; she is not consciously performing, only trying to survive. As a first-person narrator, she is the judge of her own impropriety, based on stringent internalized rules about normal female behavior. Her basic desire is to please the men in her life, to be nice, to look good. Against her will, however, her body starts pursuing its own strange desires, such as, early in her metamorphosis, the irresistible urge to eat the flowers her clients bring her as gifts:

*Mais ce que j'ai du mal à avouer ici... c'est que les fleurs, je les mangeais. J'allais dans mon arrière-boutique, je les mettais dans un vase, je les contemplais très longtemps. Et puis je les mangeais. C'était leur parfum, sans doute. Ça me montait à la tête, toute cette verdure, et la vue de toutes ces couleurs. C'était la nature du dehors qui entrait dans la parfumerie, ça m'émouvait pour ainsi dire. J'avais honte, d'autant que les fleurs ça coûte très cher, je savais bien que les clients faisaient de gros sacrifices pour me les offrir. (35-36)*

But what I find difficult to admit here... is that, well, I used to eat these flowers. I'd go in the back of the shop, put them in a vase, and look at them for quite a while. Then I'd eat them. It was their fragrance, probably. It went to my head, all that greenery, and the sight of so many colors. It was nature outside coming inside the boutique, and it stirred something in me. I was ashamed, especially since the bouquets cost so much—I knew it was an extravagance for the clients to bring me flowers. (28)

She is ashamed of eating the flowers, yet the act brings her multiple levels of pleasure: it provides a link to nature, much-needed in the deteriorating environment of the city; it is a private sensual

experience, cherished by a woman for whom sex is a professional obligation; and, though she is embarrassed by the extravagance of her gesture, perhaps, poor as she is (she depends on Honoré to support her), she also enjoys the luxury. It is easy to see how flower-eating signifies Trueie's growing piggishness, since pigs are staunch omnivorous foragers. But crucially, this step away from proper humanity is also a step away from proper femininity. The gift of flowers is a highly conventional tribute, given by a man to a woman in exchange for sexual or romantic favor. Trueie knows the script: she is supposed to gratefully appreciate and admire the flowers—which she does—but she throws a wrench into the proceedings with her guilty consumption of the gift. Though she does not acknowledge it, eating the flowers represents the subversive re-purposing of an object overdetermined by the edicts of compulsory heterosexuality; it lets her rediscover the succulent, vegetal materiality of flowers, their use value substituting for their culturally prescribed exchange value.

The ambivalence about her changing appetite is characteristic of Trueie, who is chagrined by her newfound bestial desires even as she cannot resist them. The desire to be normal haunts many of her revelations. Yet her account also includes startlingly poetic moments of pure piggy joy, welcome breaths of fresh air amidst the violence and cruelty that pervade her memory. The following passage exemplifies that contrast. Trueie has just left Honoré's apartment: he has not only kicked her out, but has slaughtered her pet guinea pig, spilling its blood all over her clothes.<sup>41</sup> Sickened, she stumbles to a nearby park, where she finds comfort by dropping onto

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<sup>41</sup> The guinea pig (in French, *cochon d'inde*) is a rodent, not a pig, yet the novel underscores the nominal link between guinea pigs and pigs with Trueie's tender devotion to her short-lived pet. Interestingly, both French and English give this creature an inaccurate name denoting foreignness: the guinea pig originates in neither Guinea nor India (*d'Inde*) but in the Andes. The murdered guinea pig has a counterpart in the cooked peccary that Honoré forces Trueie to taste when he takes her out to dinner. The peccary (also called javelina) is a medium-sized pig native to the Americas. It is classified as a different species than the domestic pig of European origin, but Trueie's instinctive revulsion toward Honoré's exotic dish indicates that the peccary is close enough to count as kin. Trueie's kinship bonds

the ground and resting firmly on all fours.

Alors j'ai commencé à manger. Il y avait des marrons et des glands... Les glands surtout étaient délicieux, avec comme un petit goût de terres vierges. Ça croquait sous la dent et ensuite les fibres se défaisaient dans la salive, c'était coriace et rude, ça tenait bien au ventre. J'avais un intense goût d'eau et de terre dans la bouche, un goût de forêt, de feuilles mortes. Il y avait beaucoup de racines aussi, qui sentaient bon la réglisse, l'hamamélis et la gentiane, et dans la gorge c'était doux comme un dessert, ça faisait baver en longs fils sucrés. Ça me remontait jusqu'au nez et avec la langue, hop, je me léchais les babines. (72)

Then I began to eat. There were acorns and horse chestnuts... The acorns were especially delicious, with something like a faint flavor of virgin soil. They cracked between the teeth, the fibers softened in the saliva—it was hearty, crunchy fare, quite satisfying. I had a strong taste of earth and water in my mouth, the taste of forest, of dead leaves. There were lots of roots, too, smelling nicely of licorice, witch hazel, gentian, and they slipped down my throat like a sweet dessert, festooning me with long strands of sugary drool. Belching gently, I stuck out my tongue and licked my chops. (64-65)

Like Fevvers, Truie is a grotesque consuming body. Everything about this meal is improper: she is outdoors foraging in the dirt, with no table manners and indeed, no table. Nothing has been cooked; every tidbit is nibbled straight from the earth. And what she eats is categorically not food, from a human perspective: acorns, horse chestnuts, and wild roots are neither desirable nor even possible meals for humans (acorns and horse chestnuts, for instance, are quite toxic in their raw state). The tastes that she savors are earthy and vegetal: virgin soil, dead leaves, witch hazel and gentian flowers—all of which registers as disgusting, not delicious, to a human palate.

But the text is unabashedly celebratory. To eat as a pig, and delight in it, allows Truie finally to feel at one with herself, to experience a joy and freedom in animality that is denied to her as a human woman. Eating brings her comfort and strength; as an act of self-care, it serves

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with the guinea pig and the peccary are thus both interspecies and cross-cultural. Perhaps the two creatures serve as a silent rebuke to the racial and often racist discourse she cites throughout the novel: while she tends to emphasize the racial otherness of the black and Arab humans she encounters in France, her body inadvertently reveals its kinship with a global, postcolonial network of piggy creatures.



as a modest but crucial form of resistance against a world that wants to destroy her. The moment is sensual, the language rich and lavish. In contrast to the stark brutality of so much of this novel, one can gently luxuriate in these words, which, even as they describe a woman grubbing around in the dirt, drooling and belching, have the lush vividness of poetry. Through the representation of an unusual meal, the text insists that there is beauty and value in animality; only according to anthropocentric norms can it be dismissed as lowly and degraded. Moments like this one form the basis, in Truie's narration, of a piggy poetics, an "écriture du cochon" concerned with celebrating, not denigrating, the specific experience of animality.<sup>42</sup>

## **Humanist and posthumanist appetites**

For both Fevvers and Truie, eating serves as a mode of resistance against the dictates of a misogynist, anthropocentric world; as such, it is a political act. The ethical stakes of their eating habits are less explicitly defined. Yet questions about the ethics of consumption are crucial to these novels. Eating and objectification go hand in hand: one must transform living matter into an edible object in order to eat anything, whether meat or vegetable. Given the womanimals' critical attention to the horrors of objectification, readers might look to them to craft a new ethics of appetite—perhaps an alternative to the carnivore subjectivity that Jacques Derrida terms "carno-phallogocentrism," the appetite that feeds on the flesh of others as a violent reinforcement of its own superiority. Carno-phallogocentrism, for Derrida, designates the categorical overlap between historically entrenched relationships of domination: human over animal, masculine over

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<sup>42</sup> A passage so vividly and specifically attuned to the porcine sensorium also undermines the critical tendency to read *Truismes* as allegory: this is a indisputably piggy experience. Animal allegories, thought to be "really about" human affairs, tend to be less specifically attentive to what it is like to *be* the animal.

feminine, subject over object, eater over eaten. This schema identifies the rules and norms of eating as a crucial bulwark of humanist subjectivity. For while carnivorousness is of course not an exclusively human practice, it is one of the most obvious and firmly entrenched institutions of anthropocentrism: animals are designated as morally and practically available for humans to eat, because they are excluded from ethical consideration. As an alternative to this categorical objectification, Derrida offers the rule that “one must eat well,” a rule that “does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but *learning* and *giving* to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one’s own... It is a rule offering infinite hospitality” (“Eating Well” 282). To eat well is to recognize eating as an encounter between agents, rather than the simple objectification and appropriation of the eaten by the eater. It calls for respect, responsibility, and generosity, situating the act of eating within a field of shifting ethical relations. Eating well does not necessarily mean abstaining from eating the other, in Derrida’s schema; it does, however, bring about a posthumanist reconfiguration of species relations, where the rules about who gets to eat and who is doomed to be eaten are not settled in advance according to humanist hierarchies.<sup>43</sup>

But how might this philosophically rich, anti-objectifying ethics of eating be put into practice? If one agent must eat another agent, how should this be done? *Nights at the Circus* and *Truismes* help map some of the difficulties of enacting a posthumanist theory of appetite. These are not vegetarian texts; renouncing meat—that is, refusing the objectification of animals into food altogether—is not an option either Fevvers or Truie considers. Instead, they tread the

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<sup>43</sup> Derrida’s critical framework of carno-phallogocentrism and Carol Adams’s vegan feminism tread on very similar ground, though they arrive there via different routes—philosophy and critical theory on the one hand, activism and advocacy on the other. Adams acknowledges the convergence in their thinking when she identifies a “vegan manifesto,” powerfully expressed though not named as such, at the center of Derrida’s influential lecture *L’Animal Que Donc Je Suis* (Adams “Animal Manifesto” 124).

tricky ground of the omnivore, continually navigating moral and practical questions about what and who to eat, caught in tension between humanist and posthumanist impulses—including, of course, their own ambivalent relationships to being consumed. Poised between human/animal and subject/object, Fevvers and Truie are more aware than most that any body, human or animal, is a potentially edible object. Their relationship to consumption thus suggests a fundamental reciprocity that defies carno-phallogocentrism's categorical divisions between the eater and the eaten, and points to a posthumanist recognition of agency in all its diverse forms. But this reciprocity has its limits. At times, the womanimals' willingness to make meat out of other animal bodies seems to reproduce the violence of carno-phallogocentrism. A monstrous appetite, practiced by one who maintains her own personhood by denying it to others, threatens to become another mode of reinforcing "the violent institution of the 'who' as subject" (Derrida "Eating Well" 283). Eating presents a limit in these novels, a place where the radical ethical possibilities of woman/animal/object being run up against some familiar humanist norms about who counts as a "who" and who is reduced with impunity to a "what."

Both novels make it clear that the embodied condition of being a womanimal introduces significant difference into the question of who/what to eat. As hybrids, Fevvers and Truie are bound in kinship relations with animals that humans commonly consider food. As a result, each woman finds herself reluctant or unable to practice "cannibalism"—to eat the kind of animal that she herself partly is.<sup>44</sup> For Fevvers, this prohibition is based on conscious ethical decision.

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<sup>44</sup> The terminology of the taboo against eating one's own kind is always complex. Zoology refers to same-species eating in animals as "cannibalism," a somewhat misleading usage. That term, though often understood to simply mean "humans eating humans," originates in Spanish in the sixteenth century to designate the Caribs of the West Indies, and has a particular racial and cultural history bound up with the fears and desires of the European colonial imaginary. Many scholars choose "anthropophagy" as a more neutral description of the practice. Perhaps "homophagy" could serve as a species-neutral term for same-eating, although it is not currently in use.

Knowing herself to be half bird, she considers it improper to consume the meat of other birds, at least in principle. This dietary stance, however, is more of a flexible guideline than a strict doctrine; in fact, the first time the taboo is introduced, it is being broken. Fevvers, having been kidnapped and deprived of food for hours, is delighted to be served “a cold bird. Which I’m that famished, I nibble a drumstick of, though, if there’s the option, I won’t touch a morsel of chicken, or duck, or guineafowl and so on, not wanting to play cannibal. But, this time, in my extremity, I whisper a prayer for forgiveness to my feathery forebears and tuck in” (77). Fevvers, she of the massive appetite, will eat a bird when hunger is her only alternative. On the one hand, this “flexitarianism” might be interpreted as a self-serving non-ethics: she declares her kinship with birds only when it is convenient for her to do so. On the other hand, her prayer to her “feathery forebears,” if taken seriously, indicates that Fevvers sees edibility as a fundamental feature of her kind—including, perhaps, herself. Asking forgiveness of the bird she consumes, she recognizes meat as a formerly living agent.

Truie’s situation, in contrast, is both involuntary and far more severe. Before she has any idea that she is turning into a pig, the flesh of pigs becomes inedible to her—one of the first symptoms of her metamorphosis. “Je n’avais pas d’envies, j’avais plutôt des dégoûts... Je ne pouvais plus manger de sandwich au jambon, cela me donnait des nausées, une fois même j’avais vomi au square. Ça faisait mauvais genre” (“I didn’t have cravings, I had revulsions instead... I couldn’t eat ham sandwiches anymore, they made me sick, and once I even threw up in the park. Not very classy”; 21; Coverdale 13). Unlike Fevvers, Truie does not decide to stop eating her kin—it becomes a physical necessity. She might want to continue eating ham sandwiches, but her new body rejects them. Truie’s account takes for granted that eating pigs is normal, and

not eating them is odd; her story is situated within a culture where pig meat is ubiquitously relished, and avoiding it is no easy task: “La seule chose qui vraiment continuait à ne pas passer, c’était le jambon, et aussi le pâté, et le saucisson et le salami, tout ce qui est pourtant pratique dans les sandwichs” (“The only thing I still couldn’t stomach was ham, which also meant pâté, sausages, and salami—all those handy luncheon meats”; 52-53; Coverdale 45).<sup>45</sup> Here Truie lists a series of human words for pig flesh without ever naming the pig itself, the living animal from which these meats are made. The glaringly absent animal referent serves to remind readers just how everyday, how “handy” it is to reduce nonhumans to edible objects. The language that conveniently effaces the living animal from the meat it becomes is so firmly affixed that Truie continues to call the flesh of her conspecifics “ham” rather than “pig,” never precisely identifying the reason she can no longer partake of it although it is clear to the reader—because it is an animal like her.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that Truie’s misadventures lead her to consume human flesh without difficulty.<sup>46</sup> Locked inside an abandoned asylum, Truie, near starving, is the first among the prisoners to recognize the pile of corpses in the yard—the asylum doctors, executed en masse in a police raid—as potential food. She has no qualms about eating the bodies—in fact, she finds the meat delightful, and her fellow prisoners follow suit. “Ça m’a fait paru tout à fait

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<sup>45</sup> Carnivorism is a global phenomenon, but meat-eating, especially pig-eating, has particular cultural significance for France, a nation revered for and devoted to its gastronomic traditions. Gastronomy is a sticking point, for instance, for Elisabeth Roudinesco, who asks, as a counterpoint to Derrida’s proposal for a new animal ethics, “could the French culinary tradition do without meat?” (Derrida and Roudinesco 72).

<sup>46</sup> That is, without the nausea and horror that she experiences in relation to pig meat. This detail might indicate that she is more pig than human, and no longer feels any embodied relation to humankind. Yet in other ways, she is resolutely hybrid. How, then, to interpret her differential relationship to the meat of her own kind(s)? Perhaps her horror of pig meat is bound up with its cultural pervasiveness: pigs are always (and often only) recognized as meat, while humans are acknowledged as meat only under exceptional circumstances. Becoming pig thus means coming to grips with the nightmare of being designated as categorically edible, something humans, at least in modern Western societies, do not tend to experience.

bien. C'était chaud, tendre, avec des gros vers blanc qui éclataient en jus sucré. Tout le monde ou presque s'y est mis," she reports ("They were just the thing: warm, tender, with big white worms bursting with sweet juice. Almost everyone joined in"; 101-102; Coverdale 94).<sup>47</sup> If refusing to eat the meat of pigs registers as odd in Truie's carnivorous culture, opting to eat—and enjoy—the meat of humans breaches a serious taboo. Carno-phallogocentrism depends on a fundamental inedibility of the human body: humans are categorically designated as consuming subjects, never as consumed objects. But Truie sees nothing exceptional about the corpses: she knows from her own experience that bodies are made of meat, whether those bodies are human, pig, or something in between, and for a hungry being who wants to survive, any kind of body will do. This pragmatic approach also explains why she accepts Yvan's regular murder of human passersby during their time together: he needs to eat, and their bodies provide him with good food.

*Truismes* thus narrates a world of edible reciprocity, where "eater and eaten are flexible and temporary categories, contingent on circumstance rather than subjecthood" (Magnone 130). Truie recognizes, against the grain of her anthropocentric and animal-eating culture, that she remains a person even when the world sees her as only meat; that meat is a condition into which any living body may fall, rather than an inherent property of nonhuman animals alone. This philosophy recasts meat-eating as an encounter between agents, sidestepping the humanist hierarchy that categorically separates eating subjects from eaten objects; it "binds humans, animals, and objects in multiple and unforeseeable relations of power and consumption" (Magnone 131). As Derrida

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<sup>47</sup> As a hybrid, Truie inherits the pig's ability to consume anything, including rotting meat and the worms inhabiting it. One might expect that her fellow prisoners, all humans, would have physical as well as moral problems eating a body in that state of decomposition, but the consequences of the meal for them are not described.

notes, “One never eats entirely on one’s own” (“Eating Well” 282): the object one eats exerts its own presence as a formerly living agent.

An acknowledgement of edible reciprocity does not, however, necessarily engender a universal sense of compassion toward fellow beings, as Truie illustrates in one of her philosophical asides to the reader:

Je sais aujourd’hui que la nature est pleine de contraires, que tout s’accouple sans cesse dans le monde, enfin, je vous fais grâce de ma petite philosophie. Sachez tout de même qu’il m’arrive souvent maintenant de fendre d’un coup de dent un petit corps de la nature, et que je n’en tire ni dégoût ni affectation. Il faut bien se procurer sa dose de protéines. Le plus faciles, ce sont les souris, comme font les chats, ou alors les vers de terre mais c’est moins énergétique. (55-56)

Now I know that nature abounds in [contradictions], that opposites meet constantly in this world, but I’ll spare you my modest ruminations. Still, you should be aware that now I often chew up one of nature’s little creatures without the slightest twinge of either pride or disgust. We all need to get our dose of protein. Mice are the easiest—ask any cat—or else earthworms, but they don’t pack as much energy. (47-48)

This “petite philosophie” gestures ambivalently toward both a radical sense of edible reciprocity and a familiar pattern of domination. By focusing on the contradictions inherent in nature, Truie situates herself within a universal omnivorous order. Every body needs to eat; every body is composed of proteins and calories, potential nutrients; nature, she asserts, is a cycle of consuming and being consumed. Truie’s pronouncement echoes Donna Haraway’s account of companion species as “messmates at table, eating together” (*When Species Meet* 301) and often eating one another, with varying degrees of “indigestion” (34) complicating the straightforward myth of hunter and prey. Including digestion in a theory of companionship is one way, Haraway argues, to “liv[e] responsibly as mortal beings where dying and killing are not optional” (74).

Truie’s nonchalant description of eating her fellow beings notably lacks what Haraway calls “indigestion.” Though at other points in the novel, Truie speaks from the position of the

(nearly) consumed, those experiences of vulnerability are belied by her seeming carelessness toward the “little creatures” that become her own meat. This resolutely affectless attitude toward predation (free of “the slightest twinge of either pride or disgust”) is surprising coming from someone so attuned to the horror of being consumed; a reader looking for a feminist-vegetarian politics from Truie might be frustrated by her willingness to commit violence in the name of a meal with no consideration of the agency, the personhood, of the bodies she views as walking nutrients. Her carnivorousness, in this passage, registers as an act of seizing privilege—not as a human subject, but as the larger, stronger animal on a predetermined food chain. But Truie’s philosophy of appetite must be read in light of the circumstances of desperation, poverty, and starvation that confront her at every turn. Her apparent lack of concern for her prey is in keeping, after all, with a characteristic lack of affect on most matters, including her own demise. Forced over and over to acknowledge herself as a consumable object, Truie internalizes the radical lesson of edible reciprocity. The ending of *Truismes* does not present a vegetarian utopia. It does, however, stage the continued survival of a creature who manages, against the odds, to be more than meat.

The situation is different for Fevvers, who, as a winged woman rather than a full-fledged bird, never confronts the threat of being consumed as meat and instead faces a more figurative kind of consumption, as a story, symbol, or idea. Fevvers, in contrast to Truie, never seems to grasp the full radical possibility of edible reciprocity. Her own body is always eating, never risking itself to be eaten. The only hint of the principle of edible reciprocity occurs in a situation involving, appropriately for this comparison, a pig. Faced with hunger after a railway accident leaves the circus troupe stranded in the Siberian wasteland, Fevvers immediately recognizes



Sybil, the Colonel's clairvoyant pet pig, as potential food: "Fond as I was of the little pig, not a bite had passed my lips since my interrupted breakfast and greater love hath no pig, that it should lay down its life..." (248). The moment seems to resonate with Trueie's vision of a "belle morte"—once again, a pig offers its body as meat in an act of the profoundest love—except that Sybil resolutely does not want to be eaten; here it is the would-be predator, not the reluctant prey, who valorizes the act of sacrifice, imbuing it with spiritual meaning to clear her own conscience.<sup>48</sup>

Excluding herself from the equation, Fevvers contradicts the fundamental principle of edible reciprocity. She appropriates the radical valorization of being consumed that Trueie suggests with her "belle morte," but applies it only to the body of another animal she wants to eat. Sybil is saved only through an act of substitution: an unlucky dog, left over from the clown act, becomes the meal instead. In the schema of this novel, not eating one animal necessitates eating another, a zero-sum game of carnivorous objectification. The decision of who to sacrifice is not an ethical but a practical one, as Fevvers and her fellow survivors eat the animal that no one cares about rather than the one with a human protector.<sup>49</sup> Fevvers's disingenuous echo of Trueie's "belle morte" points to the limits of edible reciprocity as a posthumanist ethics and a challenge to the entrenched violence of carno-phallogocentrism. At its best, edible reciprocity enforces the categorical uncertainty of Derrida's rule of "eating well," demanding ethical consideration for

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<sup>48</sup> Fevvers quotes a modified version of John 15:13 from the King James Bible, which reads, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Given Fevvers's radical education and her total lack of religious conviction throughout the novel, it would appear that the Bible functions as a literary rather than a sacred text for her, which makes her invocation of sacrificial "love" appear doubly inauthentic.

<sup>49</sup> This incident provides a strong counterpoint to the novels discussed in Chapter 4, where dogs are the privileged nonhumans. Dogs get short shrift in Darriussecq's novel as well. Trueie purchases, along with her beloved guinea pig, a dog that she immediately dislikes: "The doggy checked me out carefully, as if looking for something... This ticked me off fairly quickly. I was looking for a companion, someone to understand and comfort me, not exhibit me like a circus freak." This dog also meets a violent end: "I wasn't sorry about the dog when Honoré threw it out the window, only about the money I'd spent on it" (Coverdale 50). In both novels, the unlucky dog is gendered male; perhaps the heroines' indifference to the dogs' fate suggests a reluctance, in these cases, to form alliances across the linked categories of gender-species.

all the agents—human, animal, and beyond—involved in any act of eating. Yet it risks being reduced to a kind of “dog eat dog” ethical free-for-all, where the superficial acknowledgment of one’s own potential edibility justifies one’s casual objectification and consumption of others—a far cry from the open generosity of “eating well.”

In love, both Fevvers and Truie find valid reasons to stop resisting objectification, to let themselves be objectified for the sake of the partnership. As lovers, they relinquish any claim to self-possessed, autonomous humanist subjectivity in order to explore posthumanist alternatives, figuring out ways to give themselves to the other while still maintaining a collaborative, cooperative agency. Each womanimal is willing to consider these forms of self-objectification as a means of relation to the man she recognizes as her lover, her fellow being, her kin; these relationships approach, in one way or another, the posthumanist subjectivity named by Derrida’s rule of “eating well.” But only Truie is able to carry this recognition beyond her relationship with her lover; she, the more animal of the two womanimals, is well aware of the permeable border between living and dead meat. Fevvers, in contrast, privileges herself as a consuming body while disavowing the possibility of being a consumable one; it is only the animal bodies of others that she considers permissible food. Her own struggles against being objectified do not, after all, lead her to decry objectification when it comes to other animals she wants to eat; her appetite veers toward the ruthless monstrosity of Sade’s Juliette as well as the more affirmative monstrosity of posthumanist being.

Though they propose different degrees of reciprocity when it comes to eating and being eaten, both novels, finally, hit a certain limit in terms of their contribution to a posthumanist ethics—a limit tied at least partly to narrative and form. Carter and Darrieussecq each choose

to write the fictional (auto)biography of an individual heroine; the resulting stories are almost entirely identified with those central figures. Their liberation is what is at stake, kindling the novels' dramatic as well as political force. Neither story aims to generalize outward toward the liberation of all creatures. Furthermore, like the texts of the following chapter, these novels are about exceptional nonhumans—animals who are, to varying degrees, also human. There is a disconnect, therefore, between the forms of liberation achieved by the hybrid heroines and the forms of liberation that hold meaning for full-fledged animals.

A limit is not necessarily a failure: these are speculative fictions, not political treatises. But the complexity of feminine appetite—presented as a site of laudable individual agency, but also a mode of inflicting harm upon others—opens a space for further speculation toward a more livable world for all. In these novels, “regular” animals—the ones without the privilege of half-humanity, who lack the voice or the pen to communicate their struggles to the human world—are relegated to a status far below that of the womanimal heroines, who recognize them only as edible objects and protein sources, rather than fellow agents or kin. The speculative embodiment of the longstanding metaphorical link between women and animals can thus only go so far. *Fevvers* and *Truie*, hybrid women/animals/objects, call upon readers to recognize them as persons, worthy of ethical consideration despite their marginality. In the reluctance of their heroines to extend their own efforts for liberation to others, perhaps these novels gesture quietly toward a point that neither Carter nor Darrieussecq quite acknowledges: the struggle against humanist patriarchal objectification must include the defense of all feminine/animal bodies, not only the ones who are half-human, not only the ones who get to star in their own stories.

## Conclusions

I point out what I see as the limitations of these novels not in order to condemn them for failing to achieve their full posthumanist potential, but to underscore a recurring problem in the archive of this project, and indeed in the genre of speculative fiction more generally. Every literary venture into nonhuman realms requires a leap into the unknown, and it is difficult, even impossible, to imagine that unknown, to balance our curiosity and radical imagination about the possibilities of other-than-human being with our responsibility not to impose our own narratives upon it. In other words, it is very easy to make all stories into human stories, to imagine new worlds ruled by old rules. It takes some work, as a reader, to resist turning *Nights at the Circus* and *Truismes* into human stories, to forgo longstanding critical frameworks that urge us to read animals and other nonhumans allegorically. But there are urgent reasons, both aesthetic and political, to do so. For is it not more creatively compelling, as well as more ethically responsible, to give serious consideration to other ways of being, rather than reduce all possibilities to the same human model? Carter and Darrieussecq do more than simply reiterate the trope that women are like animals. In their stories, the relationship between women and animals, and more broadly between gender and species, is made material, such that feminism and animal liberation are more than analogous—they are, in fact, two modes of struggle against the same insidious logic of violent domination of the less powerful.

With their hybrid heroines, *Nights at the Circus* and *Truismes* each keep one foot (or hoof, or wing) in the human realm, rather than imagining the full alterity of animal being. Yet the womanimals never do qualify as rightful human subjects; according to the patriarchal and

humanist logics that structure their worlds, their difference renders them into objects to be seized for someone else's gratification. Sometimes they may submit voluntarily to this objectification, as each does for her beloved; more often, objectification is imposed upon them. The point of both novels is that as objects, whether of their own or someone else's making, the womanimals are still persons, agents with a story to tell. They need not accede to the category of the normal, need not relinquish their femininity, animality, or freakish monstrosity, in order to matter. They narrate the perspective of the objectified—the trophy, the token, the prey, the meat—without declaring themselves subjects, for to do so would be to efface the specificity of their precarious places on the margins of society. From their positions of doubly-imposed unfreedom, Fevvers and Truie map out unique forms of agency and viability—not quite as women, nor as animals, but as messy, boundary-defying, singular creatures.

A free woman in an unfree society, Angela Carter posits, will be a monster; the statement is both a moral warning and a potential road map for posthumanist feminism. These novels respond with tales of monstrous women who, despite their vulnerability to objectification, achieve a certain freedom; their monstrosity denies them the privileges of normal human womanhood, but also exempts them from its constraints. At their best, the womanimals suggest a politics and ethics of monstrosity—monstrosity as a positive difference from, not a failure to achieve, the human norm. The politics and ethics of monstrosity require the setting aside of all tidy categories used to classify the world and its inhabitants, in order to let freaks and in-betweeners flourish alongside their more categorically-stable kin. It obliges us to recognize agency in all its forms, even the most inconvenient and unsettling; to create space in the world for all beings to tell their stories, however humble.

## CHAPTER IV

### Cyborg Companion Species: Stapledon's

### *Sirius and Bakis's Lives of the Monster Dogs*

Everything worth while in him had come from mankind. His knowledge, such as it was, they had taught him. His love of the arts, of wisdom, of the "humanities!" God! Would that wisdom lay rather in "caninities"!

—*Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord* (81)

A dog has no money. A dog has no rights. A dog has no way to communicate his grievances. I am a dog. God help me.

—Ludwig von Sacher, *Lives of the Monster Dogs* (86)

When humans turn to the multitude of other species with whom they share the world, what encounters, relationships, and communities might result? This chapter reads two SF stories that explore both the possibilities and the limits of collaboration, kinship, and amity between humans and nonhuman animals: Olaf Stapledon's *Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord* (1944)

and Kirsten Bakis's *Lives of the Monster Dogs* (1997). The previous chapter dealt with human women who transition into animality, dwelling in the precarious space of freedom between species categories. Here I turn to another set of hybrids caught in transition between orders of being: a pack of beastly cyborgs who are part dog, part human-engineered machine. Peopled by super-intelligent talking canines, these novels invite readers into a world both fanciful and tragic. The dogs of Stapledon's and Bakis's novels are high-achieving scholars, lovers of the arts and sciences, close friends and family to the humans in their lives. Endowed with the capacities and fluencies most privileged by their human fellow beings, they seem uniquely poised to challenge conventional divisions between species. Yet they remain subject in many ways to the harmful effects of anthropocentrism, an ideology so entrenched that even these singular creatures, birthed from the mixed heritage of animality, humanity, and technology, cannot overcome it.

Out of the long tradition of anthropocentrism, which dominates Western thinking across many centuries, one figure resonates with particular strength in the context of these bio-technological hybrids: René Descartes, the scientist, mathematician, and philosopher who famously voiced many founding principles of rational humanism, including the categorical division between human and animal being. Descartes bases this divide on the presence or absence of a rational soul. As bodies, he argues, all living things, human and animal, amount to divinely constructed machines. The soul, created and installed by God, distinguishes men from machines, such that one can always tell the difference between a humanoid automaton and a real person.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes hints at what is now called the Turing Test, conceived by Alan Turing in 1950. For a machine to pass the test, it must convince a human interlocutor that it is a human, an outcome Descartes confidently predicts is impossible. Another famous Cartesian principle, mind/body dualism, is intertwined with his declaration of the species divide. Physically, there is a continuity between human and nonhuman bodies. But the nonphysical substance of mind elevates humans from the status of animals.

In contrast, animals, lacking a soul, are ontologically and perceptually equivalent to machines, such that “were there such machines exactly resembling organs and outward form an ape or any other irrational animal, we could have no means of knowing that they were in any respect of a different nature from these animals” (25). Descartes asserts that animals act not according to knowledge, as do humans, but rather by the arrangement of their parts. Their bodies are organic machines limited to a preprogrammed set of functions, “destitute of reason” (26) and hopelessly mute. And if animals are better than humans at certain skills, that only proves their automaticity: “it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs: thus it is seen, that a clock composed only of wheels and weights can number the hours and measure time more exactly than we with all our skin” (26).

With the comparison of living creatures to clocks, Descartes establishes a specifically modern approach to the divine birthright God bestows upon Adam in the Book of Genesis: the right of “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1.28). Spokesman of the age of reason, Descartes constructs an unambiguous definition of persons versus things. Humans are persons; they have an agency that originates not in their material bodies but their divinely bestowed souls. Animals and machines are things, with no agency but the rigid mechanical functions of their parts. For human purposes, Descartes suggests, animals might as well be machines. There is no way to tell a living animal from a lifelike automaton, nor any reason that such a distinction would be necessary: whether alive or mechanical, nonhuman bodies are objects that can be exploited without compunction. A machine, or an animal, “may cry out that it is hurt” (25), but that automatic reaction places no moral burden on human listeners. In Jacques Derrida’s analysis,



Descartes insists on a fundamental difference between reaction and response—the first a property of machines and animals, the second a privilege of human being. The Cartesian corollary is that humankind is fundamentally not responsible toward beings who lack an equivalent capacity to respond (*Animal* 81).<sup>2</sup>

Trenchant critiques have been mounted from multiple fronts against Descartes’s likening of animals and machines. In their critique of Cartesian thinking, Stapledon and Bakis take a different approach: both writers imagine the lives of animals who are, in part, machines. These speculative animals are fictional, but their stories pose urgent ethical, political, and philosophical questions in the context of the real-world present, which constitutes, Carol Gigliotti argues, a precipitous moment of catastrophe for animal life. Modern biotechnology enables a new era of human dominion, in which animals are seen as “mere objects of use” (xiv). Its rapid pace of development produces an ever-increasing range of techniques of intervention into animal life and death for various human purposes. Emily Anthes, in a survey of modern biotechnology, describes a series of cases that range from the seemingly trivial (fluorescent goldfish), to the touching (prosthetic limbs and tails for injured animals), to the alarming (including animal-machine hybrids built for military surveillance and genetically modified animals bred or “pharmed” for particular human pharmaceutical needs). When humans exert such precise and extensive control over the rest of the living world, what possibilities remain for nonhuman agency to assert itself? Is a bioengineered organism functionally equivalent to one of Descartes’s automata, reacting (not responding) according to the scripts programmed into it by the human scientist? Or does its life

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida notes that Descartes himself is responding to a series of other traditions with more generous approaches to the animal; one example he cites is Porphyry’s survey of the ethics of vegetarianism in antiquity, which insists on the animal’s capacity to respond (*Animal* 84-85). A variety of alternative animal philosophies exist both prior to and alongside the dominant Cartesian discourse of objectification.

have a value and a purpose of its own? In an era when animals are literally made to be exploited, what forms of responsibility might guide humans in their dealings with nonhuman beings?

The cyborg dogs, delivered into a world that still bears the weight of the Cartesian species divide, suffer the consequences of a double difference from the human norm. Both as animals and as technical beings, they are barred from the realm of full personhood. They are birthed from the minds of human creators, brought into the world as tools, objects, and property. The capacities that make them exceptional animals—high intelligence, language and speech—do not suffice to earn them human status, but rather function only to make them better instruments for humans. In their anthropocentric milieux, they remain no more than intelligent machines, living objects to be mined for labor, research, and curiosity. Yet Stapledon and Bakis refuse the simplicity of the Cartesian framework. In their novels, the life of an animal-machine cannot be reduced to a series of automatic processes; it is a life as rich, complex, and lively as that of a human being. Indeed, the novels might be read as book-length developments of the mechanical/animal cries that Descartes refuses to acknowledge as authentic pain. Stapledon and Bakis imagine what would happen if the animal-machine could speak in the language of its creators and its oppressors, could transmit its pain to the page.

Super-smart talking biotech dogs are highly exceptional creatures, not likely to appear outside of the realm of speculative fiction anytime soon. Yet I read these fictional beings as fundamentally continuous with their fully organic animal kin. By making visible the object status that Cartesian logic imposes on all nonhuman life, these canine cyborgs call into question the general human use of animals and the pervasive process of rendering a living being into a usable thing. Stapledon and Bakis participate in a genealogy of speculative fiction that engages critically

with real-world animal practices; H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) is their common ancestor.<sup>3</sup> Of the two, *Sirius* belongs more clearly to the science fiction genre, especially in the context of Stapledon's oeuvre; the British philosopher and novelist is widely recognized as a canonical figure of mid-century science fiction.<sup>4</sup> *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, the first and so far only novel by U.S. author and writing teacher Bakis, is less easily categorized; it won several awards in the year of its publication but since then has received little critical attention. The novels share both a theme and a method, adopting a speculative mode that is hesitant, uncertain, and even, in their reluctance to offer resolution, unsatisfying. Both describe a "realist" world; the new creatures that are speculated into existence run up against social and political structures that intractably resist speculation. They must work to find a place for themselves, and they may fail. I find this tentative speculative mode particularly productive: by inventing new problems but declining to invent new solutions, Stapledon and Bakis oblige their reader to enter into difficult and current ethical conversations about the status of animals in an anthropocentric world.<sup>5</sup>

*Sirius* is the story of a single dog, the only successful outcome of years of experi-

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<sup>3</sup> Wells's novel transposes contemporary controversies surrounding vivisection into the science fiction realm. The discredited scientist Moreau attempts to surgically transform animals into humans, but finds that animality has a way of creeping back to the surface. *Moreau* is an obvious predecessor for any SF text that deals with animals and technoscience, and inaugurates a tradition of critiquing overzealous and unethical animal experimentation. Sherryl Vint's *Animal Alterity* maps this and other traditions of animals in SF.

<sup>4</sup> Stapledon himself might dispute that status, however. Robert Crossley traces the literary and personal relationship between classic science fiction writer H.G. Wells and Stapledon, his somewhat contrary disciple, through a series of letters they exchanged in the 1930s ("Famous Mythical Beasts"). Both writers were uncomfortable with the American genre designation "science fiction"; Stapledon never applied it to his own work. The subtitle of *Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord* perhaps illustrates its author's desire to situate the novel within a loftier, more philosophical discourse than the pulp magazines that popularized the term "science fiction" in the 1920s-30s.

<sup>5</sup> The comic book series *We3* approaches similar questions from a perspective more explicitly aligned with animal rights activism. In *We3*, three household pets (a dog, a cat, and a rabbit) are kidnapped by the military to serve as test subjects for an experimental animal weaponization program. These animal cyborgs are encased in robotic armor with multiple embedded weapons; brain implants give them limited speech capacity. But the three escape the lab to pursue freedom from human control. The comic book genre allows *We3* to foreground with spectacular intensity the violence of animal retaliation against human oppressors, an important, though understated, thread of both novels.

mentation by his creator and adoptive father Thomas Trelone, a well-respected British scientist determined to produce animals of human-level intelligence. Bred from an experimental genetic line, Sirius is modified with hormones that increase his brain size and capacity; he develops human speech and writing despite the impediments of a canine body.<sup>6</sup> Though the extent of his intelligence is kept secret from the outside world, Sirius grows up as a member of the family and is groomed to contribute to improved human-animal work relationships in the field and in the academy. With his adopted human sister and lover Plaxy, he develops a profound, if tempestuous, intimacy. But his life is plagued by loneliness and despair; he can never quite find his place in the human world, and during a spell of murderous “wildness,” he is shot and killed by Home Guard forces.

*Monster Dogs* is the story of a race of dogs, the invention of a solitary and crazed scientist, Augustus Rank, working for power-hungry German royalty. Surgically manipulated into super-intelligence, and equipped with prosthetic hands and mechanical voice boxes, the dogs are designed in the late nineteenth century but not brought to fruition until the late 1960s. They are meant to serve their human creators as a ruthless and loyal military force, but they revolt, kill their masters, and eventually settle in modern New York City, where they are received with great delight by a fascinated public. They enjoy the lives of celebrities until, one by one, they succumb to a disease that reverts them to the state of a normal dog, which they find unbearable; by the novel’s end, all but one dog has died and much of their story remains shrouded in mystery.

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<sup>6</sup> Sirius shares his names with the brightest star in Earth’s sky, also known as the Dog Star due to its prominence in the constellation Canis Major. The Dog Star and its larger constellation are associated with a number of dog figures in ancient Greek, Roman, and Arab mythology; Homer and Hesiod both refer to Sirius as one of Orion’s hunting dogs. The name evokes at least two themes important to the novel: the long relationship of friendship/servitude between man and dog, and the celestial and spiritual promise of what lies beyond the earthly realm.

With their tragic conclusions, both stories emphasize the devastating effects of the human instrumentalization of animals. As animals brought into being to fulfill particular needs, Sirius and the monster dogs embody human dominion taken to the extreme; they are extraordinary examples of a very ordinary problem. Their stories are, in some sense, human fantasies: the SF trope of super-intelligence provides a fictional solution to the dizzying and frustrating abyss separating humans and animals. Those who love animals, and those involved in the work of animal rights activism and critical animal studies, might well wish that nonhumans could speak for themselves, do their own advocacy, declare their needs and desires in ways that are intelligible to humans. If animals could only talk, one might fantasize, then human exceptionalism would surely crumble on its own; humans could not fail to realize the injustice of killing, eating, experimenting upon, and otherwise exploiting creatures who could eloquently express their own pain.<sup>7</sup> But neither novel imagines a happy ending for this fantasy, suggesting that the world will not be changed so easily. Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous declaration that "if a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it" seems to echo throughout these pages (235).<sup>8</sup> It is easier to speculate new kinds of critters, be they talking lions or super-smart dogs, than to overcome the legacies of separation, misunderstanding, and violence between humans and nonhuman animals.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, neither "human" nor "nonhuman" emerges as a stable, self-same category

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<sup>7</sup> The tenuousness of this fantasy is glaringly obvious if one considers the extent to which humans are willing to enslave, torture, kill, and otherwise abuse fellow humans.

<sup>8</sup> Many writers in pursuit of interspecies community refuse or complicate the apparent fatality of Wittgenstein's statement, including Cary Wolfe (Chapter 2 of *Animal Rites*), Alice Kuzniar (Chapter 1 of *Melancholia's Dog*), and Despret ("Becomings").

<sup>9</sup> The use of "critter" as a critical term comes from Donna Haraway. Not merely a synonym for "animal," it refers to "a motley crowd of lively beings including microbes, fungi, humans, plants, animals, cyborg and aliens" and thus emphasizes what is shared across various forms of life, rather than distinguishing by taxonomic category. To explain the choice of vernacular, Haraway also notes, "I pray that all residual tones of *creation* have been silenced in the demotic *critter*" (*When Species Meet* 330 n. 33). As this chapter explores, however, these critters owe their existence to secular creators, and have complicated relationships to that filiation.

in these works. On the one hand, the cyborg dogs have little in common with other canines they encounter; indeed, other nonhuman animals are mentioned only as pets and livestock, none receiving the sympathetic, focused narrative attention paid to the canine main characters. On the other hand, though both novels focus upon the overarching difference between humans and dogs, neither forgets the diversity of the human species and the innumerable divisions that pervade it. Sirius's experience with humankind is circumscribed by the demographics of the mid-century United Kingdom; most everyone he meets is white, Christian, and a British national. But Stapledon introduces difference in the form of the class struggles, political and labor disputes, and cultural variety Sirius observes in his travels to London, Cambridge, and Wales.<sup>10</sup> In Bakis's novel, human difference is made most evident in human narrator Cleo's relationship to socioeconomic class; she is acutely aware of her conspicuous lack of wealth and social standing in relation to more privileged humans as well as to the celebrity dogs. Both Stapledon and Bakis foreground differences between the ideological construct of the human and the lived experience of being human; notably, in both cases, the military histories that shape the dogs' lives undermine the supposed civility of humankind in contrast to animal "savagery." Sirius's consciousness of the ways "the human species was not at one with itself" (119) crystallizes in the crisis of World War II, a context that defines the latter portions of the book; among other consequences, Trelone is killed by a bomb blast and Plaxy is conscripted into national service, forced to leave Sirius behind. Bakis's novel also draws upon a geopolitical framework characterized by inequality

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<sup>10</sup> The disparity between London's West End and East End registers physically with the sensitive Sirius, as well as affectively. "He was amazed by the contrast of *Homo sapiens* in affluence and *Homo sapiens* in penury" (115): the human scent, informed by health and mood as well as hygiene, is distinct between the two areas. Race and ethnicity are also marked by smell: "Negroes, Lascars, Chinese, each had their distinctive racial scent, and in contrast with these the smell characteristic of Europeans distinguished himself in his mind" (118). Sirius's brief encounters with people of color thus have the effect of "provincializing Europe" (to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's famous phrase) on a sensory level. His information-seeking, non-judgmental nose perceives vast difference across the human species.

within the human species. The dogs are dreamed up as tools of empire that will help humans subjugate other humans. Rank's patron is the future Kaiser Wilhelm II; had their project been accomplished as planned, the dogs would presumably have been conscripted into World War I. In both novels, the immense tragedy of global war troubles any abstract concept of "humanity" as a homogeneous, harmonious category.<sup>11</sup>

Yet both novels suggest a project of cultivating community across difference of all kinds, resulting in a hopefulness that transcends the dogs' sad ends. By each book's final pages, the longed-for convivial world does not exist, but might yet be built, not necessarily through scientific progress, but rather through the difficult work of forging attachments between species. The stories offer models of different kinds of partnership—friendship, love, work—that provide partial, temporary glimpses of multispecies community. In such glimmers, these speculative fictions offer ideas about how humans might live with and for nonhumans. Super-intelligent cyborg dogs are not real, but dogs are real, and the intertwined history of dogs and humans makes the dog a particularly apt figure for questions of attachment, objectification, and agency. Every dog is a cyborg of sorts, an animal produced by various technologies of breeding and socialization over thousands of years. How might the agency of such a creature be understood? And how can humans build a flourishing multispecies world that will recognize and foster, rather than obliterate, nonhuman forms of agency?

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<sup>11</sup> The proximity of both novels to world war also recalls the history of dogs in combat. Susan Orlean reports that in World War I, "Germany, where the first military dog training school in the world was established in 1884, had 30,000 dogs on active duty, and the British and French armies had at least 20,000, of which 7,000 were pets donated by private citizens... Every country in the war used dogs except for the United States" (21-22). The monster dogs, though clearly an SF exaggeration, thus owe some details of their story to German military history. Canine corps were also used by many countries involved in World War II, including Germany, Britain, and the U.S. In *Sirius*, Trelone's lab devotes itself to producing superior war dogs for the duration, though due to bureaucratic obstacles, the dogs are never used.

These questions converge in an existential query that stalks the cyborg dogs throughout both of these novels: “what am I *for*?” For creatures designed by humans to fulfill specific functions, what are the possibilities of living life on their own terms, of mattering as beings as well as tools? The dogs’ awareness of being invented for a purpose proves both empowering and coercive. To have a purpose is to be important, to have a meaningful destiny; at the same time, it is to be enslaved to that destiny. Thus their agency is complex. Their bodies and minds are human products; whether they obey or rebel, they can only ever respond to the programs and agendas imposed upon them. But in their complicated relationship to the human race, they prove to be more than instruments of the human will. Indeed, the very question “what are we for?” belies the dogs’ intended purpose: distracted by existential crises, they are not the perfect objects (of warfare or science) that their creators had in mind.

“Being for” turns out to be much more complicated than either Thomas Trelone or Augustus Rank envisioned when they set out to make their dogs. Sirius was built for research, while the monster dogs were built for war. They were meant to “be for” those ends as they were meant to “be for” the humans doing the research and waging the war. But is it possible to “be for” another without being possessed, subjugated, and instrumentalized? “Mindful that we cannot fully eradicate the power relations that determine our dealings with the creature dependent on our care,” Alice Kuzniar asks, “can we nonetheless try to rethink our attachment to it in terms of reciprocity and responsibility? And how would it be possible to do so without falling into sentimentality?” (3). The cyborg dogs and their human kin struggle with these questions, seeking out relationships of authentic and mutual being-for amidst the constraints of anthropocentrism. What if, they propose, being-for was a condition of living itself, not merely of



living as someone else's possession? What if being-for-the-other meant being bound together in purposeful, nonhierarchical relations as friends, lovers, and collaborators? One is never quite one's own in such relations, which involve a certain mutual relinquishment of agency. Of course, these bonds are difficult to build and maintain between humans, and even more between species; Sirius and the monster dogs suffer and die in their attempts to do so. But their failures are not inevitable, these texts suggest. A world hospitable to those relations does not currently exist, but it can perhaps be built if humans can figure out how to "be for" the creatures they have made to "be for" themselves.

The question of being-for provides the underlying structure of this chapter; I will return to it in more depth toward the end. I begin by considering the specificity of dogs as an example of human-nonhuman kinship. Next, I look at how the two texts deal with the relation between agency and authorship; in their explicit difficulty with the limits of human language, I read a shift of focus from (human) texts to (more-than-human) traces. These novels propose profound connections between humans and dogs, pointing toward an ongoing interdependence between species. I conclude by mapping the dogs' specific struggles with their own purpose. Love cannot provide a simple solution, and is never free from violence and exploitation; yet human-canine love, in these novels, provides a model of reciprocal domestication and being-for-the-other that challenges the anthropocentric objectification of the nonhuman world.

## Theorizing man's best friend

Both Augustus Rank and Thomas Trelone have particular reasons for choosing dogs for their experiments in animal augmentation. Dogs are a practical, not an ideal, choice for Trelone, who would have preferred to work with apes, for their biological proximity to humans, or cats, for their independent mentality. Unlike cats, however, dogs have brains that are sufficiently large for the scientist to work with; unlike apes, they are a common enough species to allow for some freedom of movement within British society; finally, Trelone suspects, their social temperament contains a unique potential for development to the human level. Rank chooses dogs for his project because dogs, “in their normal domesticated state... were already nearly perfect soldiers” (115) whose innate loyalty and ferocity can be supplemented by human technology.

Both scientists are trying to exploit and enhance deep-rooted canine tendencies; to put it another way, they are building upon the ancient relationship between dogs and people. The seemingly innate canine aptitude for human projects emerges from a long history of cohabitation and collaboration between species. The simplified version of this history is the anthropocentric myth of domestication: ancient humans created the helpful, faithful dog out of the hostile wolf through generations of selective breeding. In this story—what Donna Haraway calls the “humanist technophilic” account—the dog is a human invention, a product from the very beginning, and agency is a human privilege. Domestication is thus a process that humans do to animals, “the paradigmatic act of masculine, single-parent, self-birthing, whereby man makes himself repetitively as he invents (creates) his tools. The domestic animal is the epoch-changing tool” (*Companion* 27). Sirius, in a particularly despondent moment, uses that dominant narrative

of interspecies relations to situate his own conflicted feelings toward humanity: “Men were many and he was one. They had walked the earth for a million years or more, and they had finally possessed it entirely. And he? Not only was he himself a unique product of their cunning, but the whole race of dogs were their creation... Everything worth while in him had come from mankind” (80-81).

It is important to note, along with Sirius, the imbalance of power between humans and nonhumans entwined in relations of domestication, to acknowledge the ways in which humans have indeed imposed their will on the rest of the world for often destructive and self-serving ends. Yet this domestication story reifies the anthropocentric hierarchy it describes, occluding other possibilities for agency to emerge. The field of critical animal studies offers an alternative approach that emphasizes an ontology of relation, of being-with: domestication as an interspecies co-evolution, what Vinciane Despret calls “anthropo-zoo-genesis,” rather than as total human mastery over animals. In Despret’s framework, a human and an animal can be “in a relation of taming, in a relation that changes both identities”—they have “domesticated one another” (130) in a process that fosters new points of attachment and attunement between them. Haraway conceives of domestication as “an emergent process of co-habiting, involving agencies of many sorts and stories that do not lend themselves... to an assured outcome for anybody” (*Companion* 30). This line of thinking dismantles the dominant narrative of domestication as another glorious victory for human progress. As we have domesticated, so we have been domesticated in turn, for better or worse; domesticating does not mean simply transforming a recalcitrant natural world into resources to be used when convenient. Instead, it involves entering into abiding, intimate relations with other species. It is a matter of casting our lot with theirs for the long term, with

unpredictable consequences.<sup>12</sup>

Dogs, purportedly the first domesticated species, are key figures for thinking about domestication as a force that operates in multiple directions, and about how ongoing partnerships of co-habitation and collaboration might work upon humans as well as nonhumans. To consider humans and dogs companion species, rather than master and slave, means acknowledging the ways dogs have made us as we have made them, recognizing that, both as animal and as technology, they are “partners in the crime of human evolution” (Haraway *Companion* 5). As the first domesticated species, they are not merely humanity’s oldest tool, but rather crucial players in the very formation of humanity, which emerges from the start as a species in relation. Relations, of course, are not without hierarchies; humans and dogs have never been equal; and yet this line of thinking complicates the usual anthropocentric narrative of master and beast, pointing to what Carla Freccero describes as “a conundrum of dog-human natureculture, the inability definitively to articulate the boundary between nature and culture (and animal and human) in the history and agency of this companion species relation” (“Carnivorous” 181).

The alternative account of domestication proposes that humans are not the only actors of history. Dominant narratives that focus on the great accomplishments of mankind are missing most of the story, for agency is distributed across species and emerges in relation, not as the

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<sup>12</sup> One task of this scholarship is the teasing out of breed histories. Every dog breed is a material-cultural construct; breed histories often yield richly knotted ideological and material strands of nationalism, race, class, gender, biology, genetics; and more; for example, Carla Freccero in “Carnivorous Virility” traces the transnational history of the Presa Canario, “mestizo dogs... forged in a crucible of colonial encounters” (180). Both Sirius and Ludwig are German Shepherds (Sirius is also part Border Collie) and thus share the martial legacy of their breed. Orlean reports that the German Shepherd was developed in 1899 by Max Emil Friedrich von Stephanitz, a German cavalry officer and nobleman who sought a dog who would be a dependable worker and loyal friend to humans. The breed became extremely popular in Germany—notably with the Nazi Party, drawn both to the dogs’ military value and to the concept of a superior race of purely German dogs. Von Stephanitz had no interest in politics, but was eventually forced to hand over control of his German Shepherd Dog Club to Nazi leaders (Orlean 143-144).

property of particular kinds of individuals. This account and its particular significance for human-canine relationships resonates in the speculative fictions assembled here. It is important for these two novels that even fully organic dogs are thoroughly enmeshed in structures of servitude.<sup>13</sup> Rank and Trelone use this historical and biological relation as the foundation for their own projects; the species that is already a human-authored sidekick offers the most pliable and productive starting point for a new creature, one who is designed, programmed, and controlled by the human scientist.

The dogs in these stories feel such constraints acutely. Built to be intelligent, they are aware of their status as animals, as dogs in particular, and as cyborg dogs most particularly. For the humans who made them, they will forever be tools, objects, and servants. Both novels explore the painful injustice of that hierarchy, and yet neither suggests that the way out is to sever the threads knotting together unequal species; neither identifies freedom from attachment as a liberatory goal. When it comes to the complicated companion bonds that link humans and dogs, Freccero notes, “Newer ways to think agency, subjectivity, and social collectivity will need to be forged for the evolution of this social, but not altogether human, species-being” (“Carnivorous” 191). These novels participate in that difficult work. The complicated tangle of forces and desires that constitutes the agency of these dogs is neither fully animal nor human, instinct nor intelligence, external programming nor internal self-determination, machinic nor organic. But the creation of a more livable world does not depend on sorting out those categorical distinctions. If “agency” is to mean anything for the intricately interconnected complex of companion species, it must be collective, dynamic, even contradictory. Dogs and humans are bound together in the

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<sup>13</sup> And, furthermore, that such structures also bind many humans to other humans. Autonomy is revealed as difficult to achieve for anybody, dog or human.

same yoke; to make the best of that yoke, humans must figure out a way to think agency that can involve power as well as nonpower, and must recognize personhood as well as thinghood as a mode that crosses species boundaries.

## **Reading and writing dogs**

Both novels grapple with the fact that their stories are difficult to tell. The cyborg canines who are the stars of the show, the objects of curiosity, are too far outside the realm of anthropocentric expectation for their experiences to translate easily into narrative. Mirroring the dogs' lack of fit with the world into which they are born, the texts manifest a discomfiting lack of fit between their subject matter and their literary modes of expression. Reading and writing are issues of great concern in these texts, which must deal, on both a metatextual and a diegetic level, with the paradox of telling animal stories in human language. The issue is first a practical one, since novels intended for people to read must be written in words. Both narratives contrive a linguistic bridge between species: in both cases, the dogs are designed to be fluent in their inventor's language to facilitate their intended purpose.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, neither novel allows its readers to feel that they are getting the whole story. Language is simultaneously too much and too little for the canine experience: too much, in that it requires certain embodied human faculties (vocal cords for speech, acute vision for reading, manual dexterity for writing); too little, in that it fails to encompass the richness of their non-linguistic sensory experience (smell, sound, and mysterious metaphysical forces).

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<sup>14</sup> The dogs are, in fact, multilingual. German is the monster dogs' mother tongue, but many learn English before or while living in New York. Sirius picks up Welsh while training as a sheep-dog.

The conventions of literary expression grant only partial access to the dogs themselves; text is not the ideal technology of communication, though there is nothing better at hand. Sirius often rhapsodizes about the enormous excitement of his canine senses, dismayed that he cannot communicate his experience to his human fellows: “So sensitive was he to odour and sound, that he found human speech quite inadequate to express the richness of these two universes” (*Sirius* 34). But the monster dog historian Ludwig, longing for a moment of peace in New York City, experiences those same senses as oppressive, rather than exhilarating: “I often stuff cotton in my ears and spread a small amount of Vaseline on my nose and try to imagine what it would be like to be human, with blunted senses—which is pathetic” (*Lives* 29). Both novels repeatedly foreground sensory differences between human and dog bodies, suggesting that any human reader must approach the text with a sense of skepticism, a recognition of unavoidable distance between the words on the page and the intricacy of the story those words attempt to tell.<sup>15</sup>

Circumscribed by the necessity of human language, both novels adopt highly indirect forms of narration, putting the act of storytelling itself into constant question. Indeed, although the cyborg dogs are capable of speech and even writing, humans are ultimately in charge of telling their stories. Sirius and Ludwig each embark on a writing project of their own, but neither succeeds in producing a complete, coherent work: they leave only fragments, later put in order and contextualized by their human editors Robert (for Sirius) and Cleo (for Ludwig). The

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps counterintuitively, such readerly skepticism can coexist with the imaginative project of speculative fiction. In that sense that most interests me, speculative fiction involves imagining possibilities beyond the limits of rational or certain human knowledge, without letting the imagination become a colonizing force—that is, without assuming that humans can imagine their way into every previously inaccessible world. As Vint explains in *Animal Alterity*, the genre of science fiction productively explores how literature might imaginatively inhabit an animal’s perspective, and thus helps erode normative boundaries between humans and animals. At the same time, Vint cautions, human literary representation has limits, especially when it comes to animals: we must not assume that we can imagine everything, or that everything is exactly as we imagine it (7-8).

resulting texts, though patently about the dogs, are biographies, not autobiographies, mediated by editors whose first-person narratives provide conspicuous frames.<sup>16</sup>

There are profound connections between agency and authorship, as I have explored throughout this dissertation. Does the choice to give the last word to human narrators in these novels represent the defeat of nonhuman authorial agency? No matter how sensitive and well-intentioned they may be, Robert and Cleo are still instrumentalizing the dogs, turning them into narrative objects and thus faintly echoing the scientists who invented them for their own purposes. There is no way out, it seems, of the human monopoly on discourse; yet these novels suggest that perhaps there are other ways for nonhumans to author their own stories, other forms for their legacies than written language. The indirectness of these novels, the choice to confine nonhuman stories within human narration, thus amounts to a productive contradiction, even a self-subverting move. The dogs painfully struggle to attain the status of author; their inability to do so reflects not their own failure but the failure of the category itself. There is a link, these novels suggest, between the author and the technoscientific inventor, between the text and the cyborg. In both cases, the creations escape the grip of the would-be creator, exceeding their intended function and exploring alternative purposes and discourses of their own.

As Kuzniar notes, the identification of animals with muteness, understood as deprivation of the human privilege of language, is a trope with a long and widespread history in Western art and philosophy. Against that tradition, she traces an alternative genealogy of muteness, within which “the silence of the beasts becomes a model for the human” (*Melancholia's* 35). “Rather

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the possibility of animal autobiography, see Sarah Kofman’s *Autobiogriffures: du chat Murr d’Hoffmann*. Kofman explores how “écriture du chat,” feline writing (which has as much to do with the *-griff* as the *-graph*), might signify, in defiance of human editorial norms that would dismiss it as “chicken scratch.” As I note in this chapter, “écriture du chien” in these novels struggles against those same norms.



than project poverty onto the animal,” Kuzniar suggests, “human discourse can be seen as needing to recognize the imperative to reticence, circumspection, and awareness of its own moments of muteness” (*Melancholia’s* 35). Through technology and training, the cyborg dogs have been made to overcome their animal muteness, yet their authorial struggles reveal the melancholic poverty of human communication systems as dramatically as do the mute beasts analyzed by Kuzniar. As “resident aliens” to speech and literacy, they cannot escape the painful recognition of language’s limits.

### **“After all, I am a novelist”: Robert’s self-authorization**

*Sirius* is narrated not by the dog himself, nor by Plaxy, his intimate human companion, but by a relative outsider: Robert, Plaxy’s human lover from whom she fled to live in isolation with Sirius, and who tracked her down and stumbled, shocked, upon their queer domestic bliss.<sup>17</sup> Robert serves as a self-consciously normal observer of what he sees as a thoroughly abnormal situation; though he describes himself as sensitive, unpossessive, and (eventually) quite friendly to Sirius, his attitude toward the dog is always complicated by their mutual attachment to Plaxy. Writing the biography of his rival, Robert demonstrates the ambivalence of narration, which functions both as a means of tribute and a mode of conquest. The purpose of his text is at least

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<sup>17</sup> Though a heterosexual coupling, Sirius and Plaxy’s relationship remains unmistakably queer, non-normative, and non-procreative. The SF genre permits a dog whose intelligence, sexual agency, and ability to consent are equal to that of a human; the novel thus develops the full potential of human-animal love to challenge human exceptionalism, outside of the troubling specter of animal abuse. “Intense connections between humans and animals could be seen as revolutionary, in a queer frame,” Kathy Rudy argues. “But instead, pet love is sanitized and rendered harmless by the presence of the interdict against bestiality” (605). Interspecies love, Rudy observes, is queer (whether or not it is “homosexual”) in the ways it diversifies notions of love, affect, and family beyond established norms. “Convincing love stories between humans and animals... don’t tell us of an identity called bestiality but show us a world transformed by human/animal love” (611). Kuzniar explores literary models of human-canine partnerships posed as queer alternatives to heteronormative social development; interspecies love functions both as an allegory for queerness and as a parallel form of social dissonance in its own right (“I Married My Dog”).

threefold: he writes as a friend, to keep Sirius's memory alive; as a disinterested observer, to share an amazing story with the world; and as a victor, to chart the downfall of his adversary. Unlike his subject, Robert survives the events of the story, enjoys the acceptance of human society, and gets the girl—by the time he is writing, Sirius is dead and Robert and Plaxy are married. It is he, not Sirius, who gets to impose an interpretive framework on the dog's complicated history, to make the editorial choices that turn a life into a story. His account appears faithful enough in its methods: he cites his sources, including scientific and personal documents as well as interviews with principal characters. At the same time, Robert's urge to normalize and contain the more radical possibilities of Sirius's life makes him an occasionally intrusive, even disrespectful presence in the text.

Of course, one might expect a degree of editorial discomfort from Robert, given that he is recounting a love story between his own wife and his canine rival—the story of Sirius-Plaxy, a pair of friends and lovers constituted in their lifelong relation to each another. As two halves of the same being, Sirius and Plaxy are physically, spiritually, and sexually intimate in a way that tends to appall outsiders and Robert, despite his declared open-mindedness, most of all. In his account, he is frank about his initial feelings of jealousy and revulsion but insists that those feelings were only temporary. Nevertheless, his attachment to normative sexuality and species boundaries sets the limits of narrative possibility. For instance, Robert notably omits any specifics of interspecies lovemaking: “Both Plaxy and Sirius told me much about their life together at this time; but though after our marriage she urged me to publish all the facts for the light they throw on Sirius, consideration for her feelings and respect for the conventions of

contemporary society force me to be reticent” (168).<sup>18</sup> When it comes to sex, Robert refuses to let his biographical subject set the terms of what is narratively permissible, choosing to filter the story through personal distaste while assuming that readers will share his point of view.

Omission is not the only form of Robert’s editorial violence. Even more frustrating is his persistent tendency to interpret Plaxy’s love for Sirius as a symptom, rather than a legitimate attachment. Playing amateur psychologist, Robert theorizes that Sirius serves Plaxy as a kind of displaced father figure, that she loves him because he represents the pinnacle of her father’s scientific career, rather than for his own sake. “Does not Plaxy’s momentous decision to give up her career and live with Sirius need some explanation... Does it not seem probable that the underlying motive of this decision was the identification of Sirius with her father?” (162), Robert asks his readers; such hypotheses recur in brief asides throughout the novel.<sup>19</sup> His stake in the theory is complex: it allows him to deny that his beloved ever really loved his rival, but it also transforms the singular strangeness of Sirius-Plaxy into something utterly domestic and familiar. In Robert’s reading, the relationship signifies only in human terms; the dog is not relevant as a dog, only as a symbol. Sirius and Plaxy’s unusual relationship, incestuous as well as interspecies, might indeed yield rich psychological readings. But Robert points out Plaxy’s potentially complicated desires for Sirius only to discount them as false, forgetting that all romantic and affective attachments, including his own for Plaxy, are complexly mediated.

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<sup>18</sup> Crossley explains that early versions of the novel were considered obscene and rejected by Stapledon’s longtime publishers. He compares passages from three drafts of the novel to note particular instances where Stapledon altered material deemed obscene before publication. Robert’s editorial comments in this passage were only added for the final version. Robert’s reticence thus provides a diegetic cover for the changes Stapledon was under pressure to make, and seems intended, as Crossley suggests, “to tweak the censor’s nose” (“Censorship” 7).

<sup>19</sup> “Women with affectionate bonds to dogs are, much more often than men, treated by therapists and the media as compensating for some sort of absence in their lives,” Marjorie Garber notes (124); well-loved dogs are sometimes read as substitute children or lovers for women who “fail” to garner the real thing. Robert reads Plaxy’s attachment to Sirius as a mediation of her grief for her father, recently killed in a WWII bomb blast.

Thus Robert, setting out to tell the tale of an extraordinary animal, gets caught in the generic conventions of fable or allegory, according to which animal stories are actually about humans.<sup>20</sup> “This book is about Sirius, not Plaxy” (50), he reminds himself after another passage of normalizing psychological interpretation; yet he is most comfortable, it seems, when Sirius can be safely treated as a figure for Plaxy’s daddy issues—a classic Oedipal animal.<sup>21</sup> Revealingly, Robert appeals to his imaginary readers when formulating his theory; the rhetorical form of his questions— “Does it not seem probable that . . .”—indicates his expectation that they will agree with him. But Plaxy herself, he admits on multiple occasions, “scorns this explanation” (162), as would, I argue, an attentive reader who takes seriously the depth of the connection between Sirius and Plaxy. Speculative fiction offers an alternative to the literary tradition of using animals only as metaphors for human concerns; it lets an animal story resonate in animal terms, in favor of or alongside its allegorical implications for humans. The text Robert produces is alive with that speculative possibility, even if he never entirely embraces it himself. Plaxy’s critique of her husband’s editorial framework stands in for the reader who is open to the full implications of Sirius’s interspecies romance, no matter how confusing or troubling.

Sirius’s relationship to human language is complex: he masters it intellectually but struggles with the mechanics of putting it into practice, and his use of it is always marked by

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<sup>20</sup> Susan McHugh points out that while “animals abound in literature across all ages and cultures,” they tend to inhabit literature without actually being represented as such. That is, animal figures “[gain] literary value as dissembling the human, as at best metaphorically speaking of and for the human” (6). She argues for literary animal studies to intervene in this tendency by letting narrative animals emerge as agents and subjects alongside humans.

<sup>21</sup> The Oedipal animal is one of three types distinguished by Deleuze and Guattari—the other two are the State animal, with its mythic or symbolic attributes, and the “more demonic animals” (241) that are the focus of their exploration of “becoming-animal.” The Oedipal animal is individuated and sentimentalized by humans, “the only kind of animal psychoanalysis understands, the better to discover a daddy, a mommy, a little brother behind them” (240). Disdain for this type of sentimentality is what motivates Deleuze and Guattari’s oft-maligned, but surely ironic, proclamation that “*anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool*” (240).

difference. Engineered with a large brain and super-intelligence, he develops the capacity for language at about the same rate as his human counterpart Plaxy; but his speech, though formally perfect, is practically unrecognizable to the human ear: “So alien were his vocal organs to speech, that even when he had perfected the art no outsider would suspect his strange noises of being any human language at all” (24). Spoken language remains an essentially private phenomenon for him; his family members and colleagues learn to understand him, but the general public does not. Reading and writing prove even more troublesome, due to his lack of hands and his crude canine vision; but his persistent dedication to keeping pace with Plaxy in her studies motivates the young dog to invent a prosthetic hand especially for writing: a tight leather mitten with a pen inserted fits around his right paw and allows him to scrawl “large, irregular but legible characters” (30). In dire circumstances, he even manages to scribble a message with a pencil gripped carefully in his mouth.<sup>22</sup>

Robert both foregrounds the material oddity of Sirius’s language and, acting as self-appointed editor, judges its literary merits. He eventually learns to decipher the dog’s speech, but notes that “a rather stilted diction was very characteristic of him, in moments of deep feeling” (12). Of Sirius’s own writing, Robert includes very little. The longest passage consists of several

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<sup>22</sup> Sirius’s prosthetic hand is one of many details across the two novels that hook into a disability studies framework. Sirius and the monster dogs are occasionally judged by their families and acquaintances, and even by themselves, as humans with disabilities. Robert often refers to Sirius’s “handicaps” such as colorblindness and lack of handedness. Ludwig is ashamed of his race for being “caricatures” of human beings and notes, “There is no place for monsters in this world” (8); the ongoing deterioration of his health and mind and his experience of forced hospitalization evoke the terror and loss of control that can accompany mental and physical illness. In both these texts (and to some extent in *Truismes* and *Nights at the Circus*, discussed in Chapter 3), difference from a human norm is sometimes interpreted as disability, often with the corollary that disability is a state of failure and misery. Disability studies emphatically rejects that corollary, insisting that what is “normal” and typical can and must coexist with what is different, and that the world must be made hospitable for a spectrum of minds and bodies. A “politics of crip futurity,” as proposed by Alison Kafer (3), might also help support the needs and desires of fictional and real-world nonhumans in the specificity of their difference, support that Sirius and Ludwig desperately lack. A further articulation of animal studies and disability studies remains for a future project.

pages Sirius wrote following a spiritual epiphany: “turgid stuff,” Robert allows, “but significant of his unwholesome state” (108). He also notes that Sirius began, but never completed, two books intended for a popular audience: a study of the social lives of domestic dogs (briefly quoted), and an autobiography, scarcely begun. Of that manuscript, Robert includes only a dismissive description: “I have found the random notes for it extremely useful in writing Sirius’s biography. They reveal a mind which combined laughable *naïveté* in some directions with a remarkable shrewdness in others” (99).

Robert’s editorial comments show that he considers his task to be clear. In every way, he declares himself capable of writing Sirius’s story, while Sirius himself is not. Robert is alive, while Sirius is dead; he is human, a master of speech and writing, while the animal struggles with those skills; and perhaps most importantly, he is authorized in a way the animal never achieves. Sirius may use language, but in Robert’s view, he can never get it quite right; the best he can produce is turgid prose, scribbles, raw material that, with the help of a keen editor, can eventually become something fit for readers’ eyes. Without his efforts, Robert suggests, Sirius’s story would have been lost—or rather, his life would never have added up to a story at all. “After all,” he asserts in a moment of supreme self-authorization, “though a Civil Servant... I am also a novelist; and I am convinced that with imagination and self-criticism one can often penetrate into the essential spirit of things even where the data are superficial” (13). The author’s task is like that of the scientist: both endeavor to open up the item under scrutiny, make it legible, and transform fragments of data into a coherent whole.

In other words, Robert perpetuates the very structure of objectification for which he criticizes Thomas Trelone, Sirius’s inventor. Both scientist and author value Sirius as an object

of study, a source of raw material. Some of that material is productive and valuable; some of it proves intellectually and morally disappointing and can be ignored. Neither Robert nor Trelone fully acknowledges that Sirius might be significant in and of himself, or that his oddities and improprieties might be worth studying more closely, rather than burying under editorial interpretation and omission. In Robert's retrospective tale, Sirius-Plaxy is an inevitably doomed pairing; Plaxy is destined to return to humanity and become his wife. But he is not as successful an author as he might wish: the text he produces is at odds with his normalizing framework. Despite Robert's interpretation, his description of Sirius-Plaxy unfolds as a genuine and tragic love story. Their coupling cannot be sustained, not because it is inherently unsustainable but because the world that could sustain it has yet to be built. As I will explore in a subsequent section, Robert's self-authorized text ultimately proves less powerful than Sirius's unauthorized canine traces.

### **Resurrection through text: Cleo and Ludwig**

Like *Sirius*, *Lives of the Monster Dogs* takes shape as a retrospective account of its canine subjects by a human participant-observer. But where Robert's narration is relatively straightforward, *Lives* is a formally complex text, a layered assemblage of documents drawn from over a century and traversing multiple genres and authors. The editor of this diverse collection is Cleo Pira, a young human woman drawn into the lives of the monster dogs as friend, confidante, and documentarian. The book titled *Lives of the Monster Dogs* is Cleo's tribute to the book of the same title begun, but never completed, by her friend Ludwig von Sacher, the dogs' historian. His book was to be a history of their race, the distillation of a vast archive of scientific and

personal records accumulated by the human followers of Augustus Rank. In Cleo's book, that history, though never told directly, emerges across a diversity of sources: Ludwig's diary and research notes, including excerpts from the diaries of Rank and Mops Hacker, leader of the dogs' revolution; press clippings (some written by Cleo herself); the libretto, reproduced in full, of a dog-authored opera depicting the dogs' rebellion against human rule; and Cleo's first-person recollections of her time among the monster dogs.

This complexity makes *Lives of the Monster Dogs* a different kind of story from *Sirius*. Notably, it consciously includes the dogs' own words and permits them to stand on their own. As editor, Cleo contributes a preface and epilogue, places the multiple sources in order, and adds her own voice to the mix; unlike Robert, she does not provide commentary on any material besides her own memories. The resulting document, cobbled together from many parts, is far less coherent than Robert's, providing less narrative resolution. Accordingly, Cleo undertakes a fundamentally different approach to authorship. Where Robert is declarative about his authority—"I am a novelist"—Cleo is tentative from the beginning. When she meets the dogs, she is a college student studying history, struggling with financial and emotional hardship and unsure about her life's purpose. Only in the employ of Klaue Lutz, the treasurer and spokesperson of the Society of the Dogs, is she designated a writer: after reading an article she wrote for her college newspaper covering the dogs' Christmas Parade, he authorizes her as their sole press representative, with the condition that she submit all articles for his approval. Authorship thus never carries the same kind of authority for Cleo that it does for Robert; it is work she performs to gain entry to the world of the dogs, but it is they who get the final say.

When it comes to publishing *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, Cleo maintains that deferential



relationship to her subject matter. Like Robert, she survives the events of the story, while most of the dogs do not; there is no one left to censor (or to commission) her writing. But unlike Robert, she does not cast herself as the self-assured, capable author, the master of the story. For Robert, the task of the author is to “penetrate into the essential spirit of things”; for Cleo, the task is far less clear, less confident in its own effectiveness. Her editorial preface describes a working process characterized by uncertainty and delay:

I guess I was waiting for something—for Ludwig’s papers to reveal some hidden meaning, for the events I remembered to sift themselves into an identifiable pattern—and it always seemed on the verge of happening.

Now it’s been over six years since they were here, and I’m beginning to think that’s how it will always be, that I will always be just on the verge of being able to recall and understand everything in the right way. (ix)

She has been waiting for the sources to yield their own pattern, rather than impose her own—waiting, in a sense, for the book to write itself, propelled by the work Ludwig had put into it before his disappearance. But the materials resist her; the dogs in her memory and in her archives refuse to rewrite themselves neatly as elements of a coherent narrative. So she lets them speak without confidence that either she or the reader will understand what they are saying. Her aim is not so much to “author” a story as to do what she can to help it emerge; she is more medium than author of the fantastic story of the dogs, and thus submits herself to its gaps and incoherencies, reconciled to her own and the reader’s dissatisfaction.

Casting Cleo as “good narrator” against Robert’s “bad narrator” is not sufficiently complex for this comparison. Cleo demonstrates her own forms of human arrogance and possessiveness, as I discuss below. But in her editorial comments, she offers a relationship to textuality and authorship that is humbler, more loving, and more open to possibility than the anthropocentric

norms Robert tends to enforce. The radical aspects of the stories being told emerge despite Robert but with the help of Cleo. She is unsure what her book will accomplish, or whether it will even make any sense; the most important thing is that her storytelling is a work of love.

Even now, we're still inundated with books, movies, and documentaries about the monster dogs. Mine is not the first or the last version of their story. But I knew the monster dogs and I loved them, and I hope that, in my own way, I have done a good job of telling their story. I meant to. (x)

Her authorship is not practiced as a masterful penetration into the material but as a reaching toward it, a halting attempt to touch it. What justifies it is not the pursuit of truth, but the ties of love. Perhaps Cleo's gender, her youth, and her lack of proper authority contribute to her reluctance to assume the authorial role Robert claims without reservation. But her lack of fit points more to the inadequacy of authorship itself than to any shortcomings on her part. Cleo, like the dogs themselves, inhabits the role of an author only to change it, to open it up to possibilities beyond the limits of human language and propriety.

Cleo's narration and editorial comments provide the story's frame; the secondary narrator is Ludwig von Sacher, the elegant, bespectacled German Shepherd who invites Cleo into the dogs' social circle after a chance encounter in the street.<sup>23</sup> Long before Cleo begins her book, Ludwig is immersed in his own, and his papers are interspersed with Cleo's own recollections. Entwined within this proliferation of narrators and documents is a doubly-iterated quest: both Cleo the editor and Ludwig the historian are involved in projects of resurrection through text. Ludwig attempts to resurrect Augustus Rank, the human creator of the monster dogs, as a way to write the history of his race and, ultimately, discover their existential purpose.

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<sup>23</sup> Ludwig's name recalls Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the Austrian writer best known as the author of *Venus in Furs* (1870) and the inspiration for the psychiatric term "masochism." Most of the dogs have old-fashioned and/or German names, since the isolated human settlement remained culturally unchanged in the decades following their arrival from Germany. Nothing in my reading thus far, however, particularly links Ludwig to Masoch or masochism.

Cleo attempts to resurrect Ludwig, the friend who was lost to her through illness, insanity, and probable death. Both are bound by a fantasy of representation that they know to be misguided but cannot relinquish, a fantasy of what reading and writing have the power to achieve. Each dreams of truly reaching the object of research, of locating some hidden access point in the archive that will lead straight to his arms; each is left frustrated with nothing but a pile of documents and a sense of disoriented purposelessness.

Ludwig's textual quest is more difficult and more urgent than Cleo's; he considers it a project of life and death, and dies before completing it. The man he is trying to reconstruct is both real and mythic, a stranger and an intimate; Ludwig never met him, but owes the man his life. Rank, in Ludwig's telling, is a kind of prototypical mad scientist. As a young boy, he is obsessed with amateur vivisection; caught detaching and reattaching a cow's legs in reverse, he is hailed as a surgical genius and brought to study at the University of Basel. Eventually, he enters the employ of Kaiser Wilhelm II, with whom he hatches secret plans to construct an army of perfect dog soldiers—intelligent, loyal, and merciless killers. But the project takes many years longer than expected and, faced with his patron's impatience, Rank flees Germany in 1897 with his followers to set up a secret laboratory in the Canadian wilderness and continue the project on his own terms. Before his death in 1916, Rank promises to return one day to lead the dog army to a glorious victory; the first generation of successful monster dogs, birthed in the late 1960s, grow up under the specter of this messianic promise. It is Rank's spirit that incites Mops Hacker to lead the dogs in bloody revolution against their human captors—or so Mops claims. But now, Ludwig thinks, the spirit of Rank is losing its hold on the dogs, provoking an existential crisis: "We no longer have anything to wait for, and we don't know what to do with ourselves, or why

we were created” (10).

When it comes to Rank, Ludwig is not a skeptic. He must hold faith in the power of Rank’s spirit, for if he is to discover a purpose for himself and his fellow dogs, Rank holds the key. Ludwig also hopes, though without optimism, that the project to reconstruct Rank will somehow uncover a cure for a mysterious affliction overtaking him—spells of psychosis, amnesia, and loss of his extraordinary abilities. But Rank resists Ludwig’s efforts to rematerialize him. Ludwig’s scholarship is meticulous in ways humans can only dream of; his keen canine nose renders him attentive to every material detail of the archive. Yet as information piles up, the man himself recedes:

I can’t imagine him clearly, because he has no real smell. His scent is not human—it’s the smell of oxidizing paper, dried ink, old photographic chemicals, brown tape used to hold the documents together. I can smell the history of the papers: human hands that have touched them, and the gloved prosthetic hands of dogs, the years spent in cold vaults underground, in the library, the hours inside my briefcase. Everything has left a residue, but there is no trace of Rank anymore. It was too long ago. (5)

For the dog scholar, scent is the index of true presence, the privileged signifier. Scent communicates without intention; immediate and direct, unlike language, it is not subject to deception. For those with sharp enough noses, scent yields indisputable knowledge of the world. But in this case, scent leads nowhere—or rather, it leads in too many directions. It reveals many marginal stories about the sensuous history of these documents, but fails to reveal anything about Rank, the central figure. Ludwig’s intimate study of his material reveals that there is no continuity between the man himself and the texts and images that represent him, only an endless chain of mediation that has rubbed out all trace of the real.

As with Cleo, Ludwig’s sense of failure as an author functions as a critique of self-assured and masterful authorship, rather than as evidence that authorship is too exclusive a

category to admit German Shepherds. Even in the fantastic world conjured by this novel, where dogs can read and write, engage in archival research, and compose operas, there is no pretense that humans and dogs can truly reach one another. They may share language, but there are limits on what language can do, and thus limits on the power of an author, who may desperately paw at his archive for years and never find the truth he seeks. “If only I could understand the man,” Ludwig writes, “if I could smell him, if I could love him, I think I could understand the history of my race—I could understand what he meant by creating us, what we are” (12). If only—but the materials do not cooperate. Like Cleo, Ludwig is forced to let his source texts speak for themselves, to reiterate their mysteries without comprehending them. This multispecies pair of floundering biographers offers a double deconstruction of the conventional boundary between human intelligence and animal muteness. Cleo and Ludwig both possess language; both are authorized as speaking subjects. Yet both feel helplessly inadequate when faced with the task of authorship: neither can make words do what they want them to do. Even when humans and dogs can speak, neither human nor dog proves to be the master of language, for here, being a speaking subject necessarily involves muteness as well as eloquence.

## **Texts and traces**

As aspiring authors, Cleo and Ludwig, Robert and Sirius all want stories to work, to capture truth through language. But by employing indirect narration and staging scenes of writerly failure, these novels impede their own progress, depicting the work of reading and writing as frustrating, even futile. Exploring the limits of language is a familiar trope of literature and

literary criticism; these novels use species difference as a distinct approach to that deconstructive undertaking. Sirius and Ludwig possess human language but inhabit it differently; their canine sensorium alerts them to the inadequacy of language, its potential to deceive, and its inescapable mediation—inherent problems that threaten the possibility of any satisfying communication, whether human-to-human or interspecies. But as relative outsiders to human language, the dogs are able to suggest alternative modes of communication. These modes are not exclusively animal: humans may also participate in them, but in order to do so, they must be willing to set aside usual habits and locate their own animality.

The texts we read—the two human-authored biographies—are not the most powerful remainders that the dogs leave behind. They are merely approximations of their presence, a fact that Cleo highlights and Robert obscures. But alongside those texts, Sirius and Ludwig leave another kind of legacy: a set of “tracks” imprinted on the world and on the people close to them. These tracks constitute a different story form, having more to do with what Derrida calls the trace than with what Robert, Cleo, or any human editor would consider a text. Derrida’s trace refers to a general capacity for meaningful inscription, including, but by no means limited to, human writing. As a deconstructive strategy, he explains, the “substitution of the concept of the trace or mark for those of speech, sign, or signifier was destined in advance, and quite deliberately, to cross the frontiers of anthropocentrism, the limits of a language confined to human words and discourse” (*Animal* 104). The notion of the trace radically opens up the category of author to include anyone or anything that produces meaning, whether or not the product is intentional, rational, or intelligible by human conventions. Stapledon and Bakis explore the possibility of nonhuman texts, but also nonhuman traces, pointing toward a world full of meaning that is not

necessarily coherent or legible either to human characters or human readers. Such traces thwart the constraints of written or other media. But they hold out the promise of an alternative to anthropocentric regimes of signification that overlook and disregard nonhuman stories. Sirius and Ludwig author narratives of gaps and in-between spaces, of attempts and failures to grasp the other, of love (with all its violence and inadequacy) as the thread stitching together the more-than-human world.

### **“Glimpsed by the quickened mind everywhere”: Sirius and the spirit**

In *Sirius*, the signifying potential of the trace takes shape through the dog’s lifelong quest for what he calls “spirit.”<sup>24</sup> Spirit is a quality that is inherently difficult to describe; it evades any sensory or interpretive apparatus (language, but also Sirius’s preferred modes of communication, scent and sound) that attempts to fix and define it. Spirit represents for Sirius a kind of ontological essence whose basic unit is not the individual but the relation, a quality of being in lively connection with others. In his most hopeful moments, Sirius envisions a community of spirits constituted not by sameness but by difference: pursuing the spirit means recognizing one’s fellows across conventional divisions of species, gender, language, and intelligence. In its ideal form, spirit names a potential dwelling within every living creature to live in harmonious and mutually fulfilling relation. It is not reducible to human religion; Sirius’s experiences with Christianity leave him convinced that institutionalized belief is hostile to spirit.<sup>25</sup> Spirit is its

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<sup>24</sup> Crossley reveals that the concept of “the spirit” was of great personal interest to Stapledon from young adulthood on. “Spirit, for him, meant a character of aspiration, not a substance attributed to souls or deities. Imagining personality as a set of concentric rings surrounding a central point of possibility, he worked outward from body to self to community to the outermost sphere of spiritual experience.” However, as for Sirius, “ultimately, spirit could be imaged in this way and exemplified more readily than it could be defined” (*Speaking* 388).

<sup>25</sup> Although Sirius concedes that religion might guide individual believers toward the spirit. Two reverends play opposing roles as hero and villain: in London, Rev. Geoffrey acts as Sirius’s friend and confidant, even allowing

own kind of metaphysical force, too abstract to be realized in Sirius's short life.

Through years of struggling with his life's purpose, Sirius holds fast to a desire to dedicate himself to the pursuit of the spirit. Poised between species, he sees himself as uniquely qualified to assess the possibilities of interspecies community. Though he is thwarted in many ways from achieving this goal, the novel provides one enduring example of spiritual connection: Sirius and Plaxy, abbreviated by the two into the single unit Sirius-Plaxy. The girl and the dog, together from birth, form a profound, inextricable, and fierce connection that both founders and thrives upon their fundamental differences. As Sirius suggests, even though the two, as members of different species, are bound to hurt and misunderstand each other time and again, "the more different, the more lovely the loving" (53). From childhood, Sirius and Plaxy are "married in the spirit" (146), a marriage that has nothing to do with laws or social norms and everything to do with the inexorable and often painful bonds of two creatures deeply in love. The two are not in a relationship, they are a relationship, joined "like the thumb and forefinger of a hand" (11).<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the relationship does not depend on the transcendence of difference or on the complete "humanization" of the animal. Sirius-Plaxy is a distinctively multispecies pair, each interested in and influenced by the other's particular species-being. Their father Thomas Trelone provides them the same education in how to be human; together, they learn reading and writing, art and poetry, etiquette and social norms, and so forth. But Plaxy also undergoes

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the dog to sing in church, while in Wales, Rev. Lloyd-Thomas rallies the community against Sirius and Plaxy by preaching against "unnatural vice" in his sermons (166), setting in motion events that lead to the dog's death.

<sup>26</sup> Sirius offers this rhetorical flourish to Robert when the two rivals first meet—an interesting choice of metaphor, since throughout his life, Sirius is plagued by anxiety about the crudeness of paws in contrast to hands. Indeed, the first thing Robert overhears upon his arrival is Plaxy reassuring Sirius on that very matter: "My dear, don't *dwell* on your handlessness so! You have triumphed over it superbly" (8). Perhaps the hand metaphor provides Sirius a way to compensate for his lack of physical hands, a lack that, at least in Robert's account, the dog feels even more keenly in the presence of his handy rival.



an unofficial canine education from Sirius. They share, for instance, a heretically carefree attitude toward bodily matters such as urination and sex, and a private singsong language. In a broader sense, the girl's intense relationship with her dog/brother/friend affects her deeply and permanently. It permeates her with a certain difference that, to a judgmental public, reads as "queer" in multiple senses—eccentric, sexually suspect, other-than-human, and stubbornly resistant to heteronormative social development. Marks of Plaxy's difference abound: for instance, she is characterized from childhood by a "scarcely human" manner (49), a peculiar felinity of appearance and behavior; and although she loves Robert, she disdains his proposal that she marry him and "have babies, lots of them, as quickly as possible" (145). Though it is impossible to know whether Sirius's companionship causes Plaxy's strangeness or only facilitates its emergence, it is certain that he contributes to Plaxy's "sideways growth," a childhood space of delay marked by the deferral or rejection of normative adult futurity, and thus, Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, by its queer potential. Animals can play a privileged role in sideways growth, Stockton notes: "The dog is a vehicle for the child's strangeness. It is the child's companion in queerness" (90). Loving Sirius is a constant throughout Plaxy's life that draws her on the sideways (rather than progressively forward) path from queer child to queer adult, placing her at a distance from normative human society that she sometimes cherishes, sometimes resents.<sup>27</sup>

#### The queer pairing Sirius-Plaxy, a mutually affecting relationship of shared difference

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<sup>27</sup> Descriptions of Plaxy often combine nonhumanity (specifically, felinity) with queerness: "anyone could see that there was something queer and inhuman about her" (147). Ostensibly the word refers in this context to a general eccentricity, but by 1944, queer's homosexual connotations were well-established (OED). It is no stretch to read Plaxy as bisexual; for instance, her first childhood romance is with a female classmate (45). But her queerness exceeds her choice of human sex/romance partners; she is, after all, in love with and sexually involved with a dog. Robert's narration hints at this queerness only to contain it. He interprets Plaxy's felinity, for instance, as a "latent antagonism to Sirius" (49), a rejection of queer nonhumanity rather than a mark of it. He also reminds the reader that heterosexual, species-appropriate love prevails—Plaxy is now his wife, though he does not mention whether Plaxy has furnished him with the "lots of babies" he desired.

and abiding care, is the novel's most fully developed form of what Sirius calls the spirit; it is also the dog's most enduring legacy, the mark he leaves upon the world. Robert's biography tries, with varying degrees of good faith, to communicate that legacy, but falls short—not only because of the frustrating limitations of his editorial framework and his personal rivalry with Sirius, but because of the limitations of language and narrative itself, forms constructed by humans for human purposes and thus ill-equipped to communicate the nonhuman vibrancy of the spirit. The truest expression of Sirius and of the spirit occurs in a form that the text can only describe, not reproduce: the requiem Plaxy sings over the dead body of her canine lover. Music is one of Sirius's passions; through the combination of careful study and creative experimentation, he composes complex pieces for his own voice, his canine auditory sensitivity prompting him to employ scales and rhythms quite foreign to the musical conventions of his human family.<sup>28</sup> Song serves as a private mode of communication for Sirius-Plaxy, and when she finds him dead, song seems to her the only fitting way to mark his passing:

She began singing a strange thing that he himself had made for her in his most individual style. The wordless phrases symbolized for her the canine and the human that had vied in him all his life long. The hounds' baying blended with human voices. There was a warm and brilliant theme which he said was Plaxy, and a perplexed one which was himself. It began in playfulness and zest, but developed in a tragic vein against which she had often protested. (187)

As a formal exercise, this moment of auditory ekphrasis can only fail. The song is decidedly, constitutively nonverbal. No matter how faithful the description, the reader cannot imagine what it actually sounds like. Any song might encounter such representational difficulty, but this

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<sup>28</sup> The text posits a categorical species divide between musical forms, but human music varies widely across different cultures and traditions. Sirius's musical influences come from the Western classical tradition; his listeners judge him by those standards. Music is one of many areas where a more diverse experience of the world, beyond the relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity of early twentieth-century Britain, might have helped Sirius situate himself in relation to humankind, understood to contain multitudes of difference.

one's specifically nonhuman nature adds an extra level of ineffability: even if music could be expressed in words, the text would be hard pressed to reproduce Sirius's unique hybrid of human and animal sound.

The novel ends with this moment of explicit linguistic failure. It acknowledges, finally, that a human-authored narrative of this remarkable nonhuman creature will always remain at a distance, that language will never quite capture him. Yet the effect is not to foreclose the possibility of reaching him, but rather to suggest that it will only be possible through other means. The text cannot contain the nonhuman song that expresses the spiritual bond of Sirius-Plaxy, but it can open itself to it, using the words at its disposal, feeble as they may be, to gesture toward it. Here, Robert lets his own explicit narrative presence recede, allowing Sirius and Plaxy a final moment of intimacy that is both intensely personal and spiritually universal:

And under the power of his music she saw that Sirius, in spite of his uniqueness, epitomized in his whole life and in his death something universal, something that is common to all awakening spirits on earth, and in the farthest galaxies. For the music's darkness was lit up by a brilliance which Sirius had called "colour," the glory that he himself, he said, had never seen. But this, surely, was the glory that no spirits, canine or human, had ever clearly seen, the light that never was on land or sea, and yet is glimpsed by the quickened mind everywhere. (187-188)

What Sirius calls spirit is intrinsically difficult to apprehend; it causes semiotic systems to flounder and defies every medium. The colorblind canine employs the metaphor of color to describe the effect of the spirit, precisely because it is a quality he has never experienced; color haunts his sensorium as an absent presence. Elsewhere, he describes the spirit as a scent to be desperately pursued but never captured; the spirit evades canine, as well as human, comprehension. Never clearly seen (or heard, or sniffed out), it is only "glimpsed" in partial, hesitant, uncertain moments of attunement.

The “universal” that Stapledon points toward in this novel is tempered with this sense of partiality. The quest for universality tends to be regarded with suspicion in postmodern critical theory, as it often indicates the imposition of a particular set of values over a wider field of difference and thus, despite good intentions, reduces the possibilities of the universe to familiar and hegemonic existing patterns. But Stapledon seems to be after something else entirely. The spirit is something that precedes all divisions, including that between human and nonhuman. Indeed, in the context of “the farthest galaxies,” species difference registers as only a minor, provincial concern. Here the quest for universality is not about ignoring difference, but about tracing the connections that lie under, or come before, difference; it affirms that the shared state of simply being alive has a unifying quality that coexists with abundant diversity.

The novel’s ending, which uses language in a self-consciously inadequate way to gesture toward something ineffable, does more than challenge the limitations of human thinking. The act of reaching beyond the confines of language does not aim to exclude humans from the sphere of concern in favor of an animal-centered world. Instead, it attempts to gather humans and nonhumans into the fold of a spiritual community that does not privilege anthropocentric norms. As participants in the spirit, humans, dogs, super-dogs, and a host of other creatures awaken to the lively relations that bind them across every kind of difference, including species. “Spirit” affirms a community of being alive, of being-with. When Stapledon describes it as accessible to “the quickened mind everywhere,” he seems to suggest “mind” as an infinitely open category, not dependent on human intellectual norms. Sirius’s own mind is engineered by humans to match their definition of intelligence; but his canine attributes result in a different configuration of mind than Trelone originally intended. The farthest galaxies surely contain a diverse plurality

of minds both like and unlike humans', in configurations perhaps unimaginably different from the standards on earth. In hailing a community of "quickenened minds," the novel's end does not anticipate that all spirits will look, act, think or be the same; instead it opens outward toward a universe of possible interspecies relations, of unexpected iterations of fellowship, intimacy, and mutual prosperity.

For a reader invested in figuring out worldly relations among humans, dogs, and other species, Sirius's spirit might seem vexing in its abstractness. It posits true community as transcendental, instead of grappling with the world's material arrangements of bodies and places. Indeed, when Sirius classifies his love for Plaxy as a marriage of spirit, he downplays the concrete emotional and sexual dimensions of their union. Their relationship is no abstraction; it is painstakingly worked out over years of lived experience.<sup>29</sup> Yet apart from Plaxy, nothing in the material world ever brings Sirius close to a feeling of fulfillment and belonging. The reactions of a hostile public to his singularity teaches him that community is indeed a utopian prospect, a no-place. Perhaps that is why he turns again and again to the spirit, the ineffable promise of something better, and why the novel represents it as achievable only in death. Until the material world fundamentally changes, Stapledon suggests, the labor of individuals to form more diverse community cannot take root. In the meantime, the spirit remains as a guiding ideal.

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<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Haraway writes richly of the material profundity of human-dog love, even to the microscopic level and beyond. "Ms Cayenne Pepper continues to colonize all my cells... I'm sure our genomes are more alike than they should be. Some molecular record of our touch in the codes of the living will surely leave traces in the world" (*When Species Meet* 15-16).

## “The spaces in between”: Ludwig’s theory of love

In *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, Ludwig, like Sirius, yearns to tell the story of something big and important that hovers, unreachable, just beyond his capacity to comprehend and represent it. While the spirit is a topic of much philosophical discussion throughout *Sirius*, Ludwig’s project is never as clearly defined. In fact, Ludwig only embarks on it after he has been forced by his accelerating mental and physical disorder to abandon his biography of Rank. After being committed to the hospital, he begins sending Cleo “strange handwritten letters” (272)—writing that in its form and content deviates violently from his earlier self-composed, tidy scholarly work.<sup>30</sup> In these letters, five of which Cleo includes in her book, Ludwig desperately attempts to convey his present state of mind, to share the alternately terrifying and hopeful revelations that illness has delivered to him: “*I now find myself in the difficult position of having acquired a certain very valuable piece of knowledge through my insanity, and being unable to convey it to you, because I am mad...*” (272, all italics in original).

In the letters, Ludwig proposes a theory, albeit disjointed and rambling, about the operations of the world and its creatures. He insists on the value of connectedness, positing desire and love as the strands that knot together past and present, the mad and the sane, dogs and humans. He writes as well of his own previously unexpressed love for Cleo, raising the possibility, explored nowhere else in the book, of interspecies romance and intimacy.

*Hope is motion. Curiosity, desire, and hope alone can keep the surface from being drawn back to reveal the terrifying mechanism of the world. I would give my life, Cleo, to keep you from having to hear the noise it makes. It is a dead hum.*

*My desire for you is the last thing. You are my spark. (273)*

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<sup>30</sup> Ludwig writes about his fits of psychosis in his diary, but never writes during them until his letters from the hospital. The diary always maintains his characteristic formal, articulate style, even when shamefully describing his animal episodes.

The world, Ludwig fears, is a lifeless machine; it must be animated by all the lively kinds of relations that can emerge between beings, including the specter of a improper relation of desire between a woman and a dog. In his dealings with Cleo, Ludwig has always been courteous and formal. At first, he invites her to lunches at his West Village apartment, always attended by a butler. Later their relations become more relaxed; Cleo takes care of Ludwig after he dismisses his servants, though he never lets her see him during an episode of illness. But the passionate longing that emerges in his final letters is never expressed elsewhere. It is as if his condition provides the foundation for the expression of what is otherwise inexpressible, in two senses. His love for Cleo is inexpressible for reasons of propriety; his larger theory of connectedness, because it builds upon the imperceptible fragments of existence, is inexpressible by definition. With “the spirit,” Sirius identifies a connective force that is difficult to grasp because it is so abstract, so transcendental. Ludwig, in contrast, identifies a connective force that is material, even mundane, yet equally hard to reach due to its minute scale.

What Ludwig tries desperately to communicate to Cleo is his sense of a universe charged with mattering, where what matters may be so small, so imprecise, that it flies under the radar of language, memory, even perception itself. He urges her to consider the significance of “*those little lost details that make up the entire difference between thought and experience*” (277). These things are necessarily difficult to fix in words: Ludwig can only gesture toward them, using language to remind his reader that there is a world of information beyond the limits of what language can register. In one letter, he writes:

*Did you ever love me?*

*Not my soul, Cleo, not just my spirit, but the smell of my fur, the look in my eyes, and other things, things you could not describe, and will not remember, the things*

*that will not stay with you after I am gone...*

*I mean did you ever love me as a living creature? I mean was there anything, ever, about standing next to me that you could not put into words, or keep in your heart? Those are the things that remain unsaid, the little sparks. They cannot exist on their own; they must cling to something else, for they are nothing in themselves; they only make up the spaces in between those things that can be perceived. (276-277)*

Love, Ludwig suggests, involves a bond that is not at all straightforward. Love is not a decision, nor a thought, nor even a conscious act. It involves an infinite amount of sensory data that no signifying system, human or canine, can process. These tiny details, the “little sparks,” matter deeply even though they can hardly be perceived; they are invisible connective links, charging the spaces in between larger, perceptible things with an animating force. When Ludwig writes of love, he suggests an affective force that has less to do with any species-specific norms of courtship and more to do with the vibrant shared experience of being a “living creature.” His notion of love designates a space of total connectivity, through which particular paths might be traced from one point to another. Love is both more and less than a legible relation between mutually comprehensible individuals; it relies upon what must always remain illegible, the unknown unknowns of coexistence.

Ludwig scrawls out these letters at the hospital in a state of extreme despair. He is alone and dying; his life’s work will never be completed. Thus when he writes of his love for Cleo, he assumes that it is unrequited, that he never truly reaches her. The circumstances do seem set up for communication failure: these letters could easily be dismissed as the ravings of a dying madman, or worse, as the inarticulate jabbering of a quasi-intelligent animal. But Cleo is a generous reader who takes her friend’s efforts seriously: they affect her, resonate with her, even when they do not make precise sense. Something is being exchanged between the



two, even though the ordinary technologies of communication—letter-writing, and language itself—are failing in significant ways, as Ludwig’s letters drift into incoherence and Cleo finds herself unable to respond:

*I am talking to you, Cleo. Be careful. Can you understand what I’m saying?*

I did understand. I tried to write back to him, but I couldn’t. Drafts of letters lay unfinished around my room. (282)

Many of the anxieties Ludwig expresses throughout his other writings—about the inefficacy of language, the impossibility of reaching one’s projected goal, and the inadequacy of being a nonhuman in a human world—culminate in these letters. Trying, and apparently failing, to reach Cleo, he fears that all the tiny connective links between them, the sparks that rescue living creatures from the “dead hum” of a lifeless world, have vanished forever. It is true that his letters necessarily fail to capture those sparks: as he repeatedly insists, he longs for that which remains unsaid, unspeakable, and forgotten. But in Cleo’s own account, those lost details are not quite lost after all. She, too, struggles with the impossibility of fixing them in language and holding them in memory. But like Ludwig, she is aware of them; they exert a force upon her even in their absence. Ludwig’s letters, in fact, echo Cleo’s earlier feelings of loss after her intervention has gotten Ludwig placed under house arrest against his will, when she is haunted by “scraps of memories”—the trivial bits of experience shared with another that are too ephemeral to register as significant. “Those were exactly the things you lost when you lost someone... Even the small details that you could remember weren’t gone, really; it was all the uncountable other tiny things that had strung them together that were missing” (240).

Both Ludwig and Cleo, in other words, are preoccupied with the unspeakable spaces in between, the bits of material and sensory information that connect without registering on any

perceptive scale. In this mutual understanding, they do indeed reach each other, communicating via a pathway that skulks around the anthropocentric conventions of rationality and legibility. They love each other, though they never discuss it. This love ultimately constitutes Ludwig's legacy. It is the mark he inscribes on the world, far more indelible than his frustrating and incomplete book project. It permeates Cleo's own completed text, which is haunted by her friend's absence. In this novel, an absence is not a vacuum; it is filled, as Cleo and Ludwig both recognize, with connective pathways, even if those pathways are currently blocked. By the time she writes the book, six years after the events in question, Cleo has accepted that Ludwig is gone; she has established a multispecies family that includes a human husband and daughter as well as her Samoyed friend Lydia, the only monster dog known to survive the illness. But her connection to Ludwig has not diminished. "Sometimes I pray to dream about Ludwig," she writes in the novel's final paragraph. "I pray that when I sleep the channels will open up and I'll get word of whether he is still alive and where he is... But I never do. I miss him" (291). Alongside her kinship bonds with the living, her love for the departed Ludwig means that she still exists in relation to him, in an active state of missing him. Like Plaxy, Cleo survives the story as the grieving remainder of an intimately knotted pair. For these women, being-without the other is an extension, not the opposite, of being-with the other.

Sirius is after the metaphysical spirit; Ludwig is after the material bits obscured by ordinary perception. Each dog is in philosophical pursuit of a force that could connect living creatures across species boundaries, could bind them in relations of love and community without reducing them to the same. Each dog is memorialized in a text that can only partially represent him. But in their very inadequacy, these representations suggest that readers shift their attention

from texts to traces in order to grasp what the cyborg dogs have left behind. Sirius leaves behind a trace of the universal community of spirit, manifest most concretely in his lifelong love shared with Plaxy. Ludwig leaves behind a trace of the infinite connecting sparks that animate the world, manifest most concretely in his relationship with Cleo. Each human woman is the living bearer of these traces, a situation that resembles, but fundamentally differs from, the familiar misogynistic trope of a male author exploiting a female medium. These women are not mere writing-pads, objects for the use of a male subject, just as these dogs are not mere tools for the use of a human subject. Instead, each pair becomes who they are in connection: Sirius-Plaxy, Ludwig-Cleo. When one piece of the relation dies or disappears, the connection is broken but still exerts its constitutive force. One might say it is -Plaxy and -Cleo who are left behind, each bearing the traces of her beloved dog—not because a woman is nothing without a man, but because lives forged in connection make independence an impossible fiction.

### **Dogs and masters: being-for-the-other**

*Sirius* and *Lives of the Monster Dogs* each focus on the importance of connection, on the ways a living creature, enmeshed in networks of interspecies relation, is never quite an individual. Each novel also foregrounds the particular significance of connection for dogs in a human-dominated world. More than other animals, the canine species came into being as the result of an interspecies connection; dogs thus bear the cultural and genetic traces of their ancient relationship with human beings. Mindful of this legacy as well as their own unusual births, the dog characters grapple explicitly with the question “what are we *for*?” Each novel explores

several possibilities, including the possibility of freedom from and active aggression toward humankind. Yet ultimately, independence—being for oneself alone—is not the proposed goal. The cyborg dogs, created as human objects, are intimately familiar with interspecies dynamics of mastery and enslavement. Even as they chafe against anthropocentric domination, however, they recognize the value of total submission to a beloved other, of being profoundly for someone other than oneself. These novels offer doggish devotion as a general model for companion species relations and a value for humans as well as nonhumans. Being-for-the-other emerges as the most mutually profitable, world-enriching answer to the dogs' oft-posed question of purpose.

The question of purpose is a matter of explicit concern in *Sirius*, which explores a number of possibilities: either a super-dog or a human might be for work (intellectual or physical), family, art, religion, sex, love, or a state of nature. Sirius's lifelong existential crisis boils down to a series of related conflicts: between the inventor and the invention, between human intelligence and animal instincts, between reason and passion. For Trelone the creator, the question of what Sirius is for is simple: he is an experiment in the possibilities of human scientific achievement. The scientist's publicly stated goal is to produce "a rather super-sub-human intelligence, a missing-link mind" (15), resulting in animals that are better able to serve human needs; he successfully breeds, for instance, a race of "super-sheep-dogs" that can perform normal dog tasks with remarkable speed and cleverness. But his more ambitious research project, kept top-secret from the public, is to produce animals of human-level intelligence. Sirius is the only success; no other experimental dog survives. Trelone raises Sirius as a member of the family, attempting to make no discrimination based on species, in order to learn exactly what he is capable of; the dog trains at a sheep farm to develop his physical skills as a sheep-dog and studies at Trelone's lab in

Cambridge to develop his intellect. This double education, Trelone imagines, will equip Sirius for his life's work as an "animal researcher"—he can simultaneously be the object of study and an authorized contributor to the research.

Ludwig immerses himself in the archives in an impossible attempt to get close to his creator Augustus Rank. Sirius enjoys unfettered access to his own creator, a privilege Ludwig longs for; yet for all their closeness, Trelone rarely provides satisfactory answers to Sirius's questions.<sup>31</sup> The practical-minded scientist Trelone does not anticipate his creation's urgent ontological questions. From his perspective, one is naturally for one's work: a sheep-dog is for shepherding, a researcher is for researching. Sirius was invented to be the ideal research partner: an animal who not only can consent to being studied but can actually assist the scientist, actively participating in the production of knowledge. Constructed exactly to specifications, how could the dog be for anything else? For Sirius, however, Trelone's program is conspicuously lacking: it facilitates Sirius's career, but neglects other important areas of a well-rounded life, such as love, sex, and spirituality. Most crucially, it disregards the importance of connectedness, failing to cultivate the kinds of attachments that Sirius, a would-be trailblazer of interspecies community, so desperately needs. "Why did you make only one of me? It's going to be lonely being me" (52), Sirius asks Trelone on one occasion; another time, he pleads "Why did you make *me* without making a world for me to live in" (78). Trelone's goal is to produce a novel research object; he assumes that a new kind of being can be unproblematically imported into the existing world. But Sirius understands himself not as an individual, but as a being-plus-world; he tries

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<sup>31</sup> Sirius's struggles with Trelone recall Wimsatt and Beardsley's famous assertion that "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (115). The scientist-author's intentions are not enough to explain the complicated reality of the "work" that is produced.

to form attachments, but with rare exceptions, the human world refuses to reciprocate. What Trelone fails to recognize is that a newly invented creature will require newly invented kinds of relationships. Sirius's intelligence, as useful as it is, cannot substitute for a world of community.

Dissatisfied with Trelone's carefully-laid plans, Sirius occasionally locates his lost sense of purpose in active, violent rebellion against human legal and ethical norms. The animal designed for a life of human service never loses the ability to turn away from his programming and education and give himself over to what he perceives as canine instincts. Throughout his life, Sirius is plagued by spells of being overtaken by his "wolf nature," in which "the human odour became an intolerable stench... A great loathing of man would seize him" (83). These wolf moods occasionally lead him to murder. In one significant episode, he secretly kills and feeds upon a sheep from a neighboring farm, in an act that is both the willful reassertion of his savage nature and a symbolic act of protest against humanity—the sheep "epitomized all the tyranny of the sheep-dog's servitude" (84).<sup>32</sup> His latent hostility toward humankind even surfaces, at times, with Plaxy: "Instead of seeing the dearest face in the world, he saw the uncouth hairless features of a super-ape, in fact of that species which so long ago had broken in his ancestors to be their slaves in body and soul" (87). But pure animality never feels sufficient to Sirius. Once the wolf rage has lifted, his episodes of violence always fill him with shame and horror; he is too compassionate to relish harm done to other beings, even his own prey. In a further irony, he cannot indulge his "natural" instincts independent of his human education. His wild behavior is

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<sup>32</sup> In *Monster Dogs*, Mops Hacker demonstrates a similar hatred of human-domesticated animals; in his diary, he describes (using his characteristic Biblical prose) a prescient dream in which the dogs rise up and slaughter the town's humans, but also their livestock: "and the Cows we Milked were Crushed by burning beams, and they Bellowed and then they Died horribly burning" (151). Neither Sirius nor Mops, it seems, see any place for community between animal species in their rhetoric of dog liberation.

always at least partly staged as resistance; the sheep he slaughters, for instance, attracts him as an allegory of human dominion as much as a tempting piece of meat.

For short periods, Sirius finds a satisfying and robust sense of purpose when he is able to combine Trelone's programming with his own self-determination. For a time, he is engaged as a fully equal (though publicly unrecognized) partner to a sympathetic sheep farmer; he helps manage farm operations and runs a side business breeding and training super-sheep-dogs. "This was probably the happiest time of Sirius's life," Robert notes. "At last he felt that he was using his super-canine powers adequately, and he had attained a degree of independence that he had never known before" (139). When Plaxy eventually gives up her teaching job to live at the farm and assist Sirius, the pair establishes a blissful routine of work and play, each contributing their particular skills and knowledge toward a common goal. This period allows Sirius to bring together two of his strongest and most deeply-held drives: his sense of being for some important and singular work, and his sense of being for Plaxy. After many tumultuous years of adolescent quarrels and reconciliation, intermittent attraction and revulsion, Sirius-Plaxy, as adults, are able to enjoy a period of peace together, secure in their love and their mutual sense of being "married in the spirit" (146). But the outside world intervenes in their joy when rumors of an improper and bestial relationship spread throughout the village. In the most fundamental way, Sirius and Plaxy are for each other, yet being-for-the-other is shown to be not quite enough: a singular relationship is only sustainable if knotted into the supportive structures of a larger world. The ache of lacking a world, of having no place, haunts Sirius throughout the years and incites the final fit of wildness that ends his life. Plaxy's love, though necessary, cannot substitute for that lack; as he tells her in one of their final conversations, "You cannot make a world for me. Of

course, any world that I could live in must have you in it for its loveliest scent, drawing me along the trail; but you can't make a whole world for me" (184).<sup>33</sup>

Sirius ultimately feels himself to be for "the spirit," the quest to recognize and foster universal community. Everything else in his life—work, music, love, and family—is an offshoot of that primary project. Significantly, for this canine burdened by his relationship with humankind, being-for-the-spirit is best understood by the metaphor of domestication. When Sirius recounts his spiritual epiphany, the moment when he felt closest to understanding the vastness and magnitude of the spirit, he writes of an indescribable sensory quality that is at first like a scent to be pursued, "more hunt-worthy than the trail of a fox" (109); this compelling prey, however, eventually turns upon its hunter and overtakes him in a moment of supreme bliss. Struggling for adequate language to describe his moment of revelation, Sirius suggests that his quarry was "the universal Master, the superhuman master whom my super-canine nature so desperately needed to take possession of me and steady me with his claim for absolute loyalty and service" (110). To cast the spirit as a Master seems, at first, to reduce it to familiar patriarchal and anthropocentric terms: a Master suggests a central male authority that dominates and domesticates the rest of the world, anathema to the kind of nonhierarchical interspecies community that Sirius seems to be after. But in the critical tradition invoked by this chapter, domestication is a reciprocal relationship; the one called Master is also bound by and affected by his relationship to the one called servant. Sirius's master-servant metaphor, patterned after human-dog relations, insists on the value of powerlessness; it gestures toward universal submissiveness as the basis for spiritual

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<sup>33</sup> The notion of an animal having or not having world recalls Heidegger's famous declaration that "the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming" (discussed in more detail in this project's introduction), but with a significant difference. *Sirius* shows how being deprived of world is a circumstantial, not inherent, attribute of an animal. Anthropocentrism, not his own animality, is what deprives Sirius of a world.



community—a sense of giving oneself up to the other, as dogs give themselves up to be possessed by the humans they love. In Sirius’s ideal spiritual community, being-for-the-other will not be the mark of an inferior species, but a universal requirement.

## **Love and/as domestication**

The monster dogs of Bakis’s novel maintain a curiously paradoxical relationship to their original purpose. In Ludwig’s account, Augustus Rank emerges as both a Cartesian villain, devoted to his scientific work and perversely nonchalant about human and animal suffering, and a savior, the only one who can rescue the dogs from their philosophical and physical decline. At Rankstadt, the isolated Canadian settlement where Rank’s followers finally bring his plans to fruition years after his death, the newly created dogs chafe against the servitude into which they are born. Although super-intelligent and outfitted with prosthetic hands and voice boxes, they are conscripted into the mundane ranks of domestic workers and pets. Ironically, it is the myth of Rank that sustains them; as Ludwig writes, “We knew no other life, but we were also aware that we had been created for a higher purpose. We knew Rank had better ideas. And we waited for him to come back—to come and take us away, lead us into battle, to some great, undefined victory” (10). Eventually the dogs, led by Mops Hacker, rise up against the humans that were their manufacturers, captors, and adopted families; no man, woman, or child is left alive.<sup>34</sup> Mops’s persuasive rhetoric of freedom from human oppression is buttressed, somewhat

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<sup>34</sup> This note of the story resonates with the 2014 Hungarian film *White God*, which depicts another canine revolution led by an abandoned mixed-breed pet. *White God*’s uprising is also achieved through horrifying violence: humans who attempt to control the dog mob are brutally killed. But the film places these attacks in the context of everyday human-on-animal violence, including dogfighting, butchery, wanton cruelty, and euthanasia. Like Bakis’s novel, the film leaves open the question of whether the dogs (and allegorically, any oppressed group) are justified in shedding the blood of their oppressors in the name of freedom.

paradoxically, by his claim to be “a dog with the soul of a man” (197)—that is, the reincarnated soul of Augustus Rank. It is only by marshaling the force of the original master that Mops can win dogs to his cause and successfully stage a revolution against their current masters, who are charged with distorting Rank’s original vision by subjecting his super-dogs to domestic servitude.

The violence of the revolution is a matter of some internal debate within the dog community; according to its operatic reenactment, Lydia and several other dogs opposed the indiscriminate bloodshed. In fact, Lydia herself killed Mops to put an end to the battle.<sup>35</sup> The libretto depicts her leading the surviving dogs away from Rankstadt, claiming “We can be our own masters” (216). At the end of the opera, her followers sing a line that might serve, in its uncertainty, as the refrain of the dogs’ existence: “If we aren’t soldiers, who knows what we’re for? But we’re free, we’re free, and we’ll go” (216). The dogs do achieve a degree of freedom, described in pointed contrast not only to “regular” dogs but also to many humans, Cleo included. Upon their arrival in New York City, they immediately become objects of human fascination and admiration. There is no attempt to restrain or imprison them; they integrate into human society, setting up residence in the Plaza Hotel, dining in fancy restaurants, appearing on talk shows. The reason for their easy transition, Cleo suggests, has to do with class privilege that in this case transcends species: “They were celebrities and they were rich, and their lives seemed elegant and charmed. They inhabited a New York of marble lobbies, potted palms, brass-trimmed elevators, and chandeliers, a city completely different from the one I lived in” (28). Their wealth

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<sup>35</sup> Lydia’s murderous act, undertaken in the name of peace, echoes a traditional gender binary: Mops the male hero incites warfare, while Lydia his female love interest promotes pacifism. But Lydia makes it clear to Cleo that she is not squeamish about death and killing, an attitude she criticizes in human beings. Nor does she attach any particular political force to her assassination; in her words, it simply happened. “He had shed so much blood, so very much, and then we had a fight, and I just—I just killed him. And I am a dog, after all. Not only a dog but one bred to do certain things, although I may choose not to sometimes. I don’t know whether that is a kind of freedom...” (168).

comes from the priceless Prussian jewels and antiques they carried out of Rankstadt, multiplied by skillful commercialization of their celebrity status. Due to the long isolation of Rankstadt, the dogs are effectively products of nineteenth-century Germany; they dress in elegant 1880s fashions and build a replica of a Bavarian castle in the East Village, and their old-fashioned European quirks soon become fashionable among humans. Thus their oddities are perceived as lovable eccentricities, their alienness charming instead of threatening.

On the surface, the question of being-for seems to have lost its urgency for these high-society dogs. They have fled slavery and established themselves as self-sufficient, wealthy, and well-loved in a city full of interesting pursuits. A life of leisure appears purpose enough. At first, Ludwig feels himself quite alone in continuing to pose the moral problem of purpose. “We have a new home now; we have money and no masters; why not let ourselves be absorbed into this new world? What does it matter if we don’t understand our purpose?” (87). But the inexplicable disease affecting the super-dog population revitalizes the question. The dogs, as a whole, enjoy a casual relationship to mortality; Ludwig dreads his own death less than the collective death of his species, and hopes more keenly to save his race than to save himself. Unfortunately for his project, the origins of the monster dogs are shrouded in mystery. Ludwig’s research yields no reference to the process by which their brains were manipulated, nor any clue to why that process is breaking down. To figure out their predicament, Ludwig believes, they need to address the question of purpose, which, although it has practical implications, is spiritual, not technical; like the dogs’ revolution, it involves a paradoxical quest for the mythic original master combined with a rejection of any potential current master.

But what was Rank’s original purpose? What, according to the man who designed

them, were these dogs for? The answer that Ludwig sketches out across his research reflects the deep ambivalence of humans' relationships to animals. Rank longed for an army of creatures that would fight for him, but also love him. The dogs are meant to be exploited as military weapons, but they are also meant to be corporeally and affectively connected to Rank. Both power and love are methods of binding, and Rank envisions a perfect coherence between the two, producing servitude mixed with utter devotion. "He was a man who wanted to control things, to extend himself beyond the boundaries of his body," Ludwig writes. "Humans could not be perfect extensions of his will. But we could" (5). In Rank's fantasy, the dogs enact his will because they share it: they serve him willingly because they are, in the profoundest sense, for him.

Rank's final diary entry, reprinted by Ludwig, reads:

*I have never in my life known real love. The inconstant devotion of my people is a pale substitute. Had I completed my dogs, their love would have been fierce and undying, a passion—but I am becoming so sentimental! Someday they will be created and they will know that they were everything to me, that I loved them like my children, that I loved them before they existed. They will wait for my return as dogs wait for their masters, desperately, hanging by the door, crying and pacing, growing more anxious as the hour approaches, thinking of nothing else but that moment, that moment when the door will open—* (11-12, italics in original)

Rank's double purpose for the dogs makes it clear that love and violence are not at all incompatible. He designed his dogs to be "fierce, numerous, and disposable (for more could always be made)" (115), but also to be kin. He binds himself to them, as much as he binds them to him, in reciprocal relations of "real love." There is no doubt about the processes of objectification that underly this bond. The dogs of Rank's fantasy are programmed to love him and thus have no choice; the "real love" he envisions is unabashedly coerced. In his final metaphor, love takes the form of painful subjugation: the dogs' love for Rank makes them suffer, unable to do anything but wait for him. He can only imagine a love that involves mastery, not equality.

Yet the persistent attention to love marks a crucial difference between Rank's form of objectification and the Cartesian legacy. Descartes is dispassionate and rational, reducing the world to a set of clockwork mechanisms that can be taken apart and reassembled to increase human knowledge. Rank is, in some ways, portrayed as an extreme Cartesian: single-mindedly dedicated to his work, he fits the world into a set of diagrams and experimental apparatuses and is not given to emotional or interpersonal attachments. At the same time, Rank's mechanistic philosophy is anything but neutral. Ludwig emphasizes the man's passion for his work: vivisection is not just his job but his obsession, fueled by ardor both intellectual and emotional.

Rank's first act of vivisection occurs by accident when he is eleven years old. Angry at being teased by his uncle's servants, he chops a hole in a tree with his pocket knife, displacing a young bird, which he then impulsively stabs:

At the instant when the blade entered the bird's flesh, Augustus suddenly had the feeling that he was piercing a thick, muffling membrane which had separated him from the world for so long that he had not been aware of its existence until this moment. For a split second he touched another living creature; he touched its heart, and opened it, and blood spurted out. (33)

Rank's incision echoes Descartes's verbal dissection of an animal heart, but with a notable difference. For Descartes, the observation of blood pumping through the heart is proof of the mindless, automatic force that constitutes bodily activity. There is no great difference between cutting into an animal heart and taking apart a clock; both are modes of disassembly, opening up the nonhuman object to the curious human gaze. The violence of such an undertaking is thoroughly effaced; the blood that flows in Descartes's example is not evidence of suffering but merely a mechanism to be observed. In *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, the animal heart is once again penetrated, first by the knife, then by the human eye; it is opened and made to reveal the

knowledge carried within. But Rank's version restores the affect, the passion, that Descartes evacuates from his sanitized, rational account. Descartes's heart operates with the sterility of clockwork; Rank's heart spurts blood, and makes him feel.

Rank's subsequent vivisection practice is based, like Descartes's, on a project of scientific rationality. It is a knowledge-gathering process, a means of turning live animals into bodies of data. But Rank, unlike Descartes, lets slip that rationality involves its own kind of passion, that penetrating the world of knowledge is a thrilling, even erotic experience. Stabbing the bird is a moment of tactile connection, at once violent and intimate. It illustrates the curious way that, for Rank, violence and love are not at all contradictory. Both are enacted along the same structures: touch, connection, passion. Thus for Rank, scientific practice is not a way to remove himself from the world but, on the contrary, the only way he can get close enough to touch it. Similarly, animal experimentation is not a way to reduce living creatures to lifeless machines, for it is their liveliness that interests him, even as he makes a career out of killing them. When it comes to his ultimate project, his design is similarly paradoxical: his perfect monster dog is a war machine and yet capable of the most lively, intimate attachments to its loving creator.

Interestingly, Cleo, the only human besides the specter of Rank who plays a major role in the dogs' lives, seems to inherit Rank's complicated attitude toward them. Rank believes that an object of control can also be a love object. Cleo believes the reverse: a love object should also be an object of control. Although she is a devoted friend to the dogs, her love takes a violent turn when she fears that her cherished Ludwig, suffering terribly from his bouts of mental and physical disorder, will kill himself. Motivated by concern, she makes arrangements with the Dog Society to put him on suicide watch against his will: "I will not allow you to kill yourself" (234).

The humiliation of being a prisoner sends Ludwig further into despair and sickness: trying to escape, he jumps from his apartment and is badly injured. His final days are spent in a hospital, writing his feverish letters to Cleo, until he disappears or dies—Cleo is never sure which.

Her act of love is thus also a betrayal, a fact that she recognizes but cannot quite admit. She loves the dogs so much that she would keep them alive against their will: her love authorizes her, she feels (as a friend, and as a human companion to a dog), to “allow” Ludwig to live or die. Cleo’s insistence that the dogs must live at all costs is a point of contention with her friend Lydia, who reminds her that the dogs have a different relationship to death and killing that may not make sense in human terms. Later, as more and more dogs succumb to illness, the Dog Society establishes committees to shoot the afflicted members of their ranks. Cleo is horrified, but Lydia sees it as a way to escape sickness with dignity: “I am a member of a dying race. There is no place for me in this world.” Cleo can only respond: “I don’t pretend to understand what it feels like to be you. All I know is that I want you to live” (258-259). Cleo thus imposes her own purpose onto the dogs’ existence: because she loves them, she wants them to be for her.

But love, Lydia and Ludwig remind her, is not enough, or perhaps it is too much. Like Rank, Cleo mixes love and the violent mechanisms of control. Her attachment is possessive, threatening to turn her friends into objects stripped of autonomy. Both Cleo and Rank show that the closer one gets, the more harm one can inflict on a beloved object, whether intentionally or not. The nasty potential of love and intimacy presents difficulty to critical theories that deal with the ethics of relation. It is tempting to turn to love as an affirmative force, an antidote to violence; approaching the other with love, one might hope, produces a tenderly friendly encounter. But even between humans, love is difficult to extricate from self-interested possessiveness.

To make an other into a love object is, in a nontrivial sense, to objectify it. “Every theory of love is, necessarily, a theory of object relations,” suggest Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips (72); Freud lays the groundwork for the psychoanalytic axiom that “we love only ourselves” (75).<sup>36</sup> This fundamental narcissism can be only compounded by the unevenness of power in an intimate relationship between differently-classed beings. As Claire Jean Kim notes, many humans understand practices of animal domination in terms of love: “it is far too easy for us to confuse what feels good to us emotionally—becoming with, bonding with, communing with an animal... with acting in such a way as to respect and honor that being in the fullness of his or her being, in the fullness of his or her needs, desires, and interests” (Freccero and Kim 472).<sup>37</sup> Rank and Cleo show that love, especially a human’s love for a nonhuman, is perfectly compatible with violence and exploitation.

Nevertheless, love, with all of its capacity for violence, provides the closest thing to an answer to Ludwig’s frustrating quest for purpose. Despite Cleo’s betrayal, despite her insistence on managing her friend’s life and death, Ludwig writes to her from the hospital, desperately trying to share his newfound awareness of love as the network of connective threads binding all living creatures and animating the world. Ludwig’s love for Cleo, like his love for Augustus Rank, is forged along pathways of biology, history, and technology; it has to do with the ancient inheritance of domestication, as well as the more modern mechanical and genetic innovations that

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<sup>36</sup> In the theory Freud develops in “On Narcissism,” the idealization of the beloved is a transference of the subject’s idealization of himself in infancy. Thus “the loved one carries the burden of being identified with two other love objects that have nothing to do with her: the man’s mother and his own idealized infantile ego” (Bersani and Phillips 73). In this line of thinking, love can never fail to be both narcissistic and consuming.

<sup>37</sup> Many dog lovers value the supposedly unconditional love of their canine companions, which might reveal, Garber suggests, a human attachment to authority. She asks rhetorically, “do we ‘love’ dogs not only because they ‘love’ us, but because the power relation between a human being and an inferior loving subject is intrinsically pleasurable? Is caninophilia an erotics of dominance?” (125).



leash the monster dog to the species that made him. It is a love that is not at all freely chosen or self-determined. For all that, however, it is inescapably real. Love for Cleo, and love in general, is what Ludwig determines himself to be for. It is his purpose both as a monster dog and a living creature. Love obliges one to be for another, and not just for oneself. It requires a significant degree of unfreedom and submission, of letting the beloved be one's master.

Love, in other words, is a kind of domestication; thus the love between a dog and a human exemplifies love's dangers as well as its possibilities. Despret, Haraway, and Freccero point out how approaching domestication as a process of co-evolution and mutual exchange, rather than unilateral human dominion, involves a complicated reworking of agency; linking love to domestication involves similar complications. It is always a risk to be for another. Such a relation runs the risk of cruel and unjust exploitation, as when Rank and Cleo assert that their love entitles them to possess their beloved dogs. To be for should not mean that one lover seizes the agency of the other. In the model of love at stake here, there is a mutual relinquishment of agency; neither lover is in charge, and yet each is compelled by the other, as Despret says of domestication, into "a relation of taming... a relation that changes both identities" (130). How might Augustus Rank, if he let himself consider it, be tamed by the dogs he himself created, by their relentless and self-effacing love? How might Cleo be tamed by her love for Ludwig, even as she tries to tame him into sterile longevity against his will?

Cleo, in fact, demonstrates her own version of how to be for one's beloved. As author, she has dedicated herself to the task of helping Ludwig's story be told, even though her version remains painfully and self-consciously incomplete. The book is a labor of love, a delayed response to the letters Ludwig sent her from the hospital; it is an attempt to reach him, wherever

he is, through the channels of connective absences and presences that link them across species and across the boundary between life and death. She knows the attempt will fail, but even the failure does something: it helps mitigate the pain of her love for him, the pain for being for someone who is gone forever. Though Cleo's love is sometimes selfish, she, too, lets herself be possessed and dominated by love for Ludwig and for the dogs as a whole.

I wanted to be with the dogs, wherever they were going, even though I knew it was impossible. They weren't even gone and I already missed them so much that my whole body ached. The raw pain of having joints and muscles and organs, the uncushioned feeling of living, without hope or love, my throbbing heart, it all hurt so much. I just didn't want to be in the world without them. (266)

Once her life is interlinked with theirs, it can never be extricated; her whole self—her career, social circle, family, even her body—becomes constituted in relation to them. She cannot bear to be in the world without them; to be Cleo, in a nontrivial sense, is to be the dogs' friend, to tell their story, to love them. Writing the book is less an act of creative authorship, and more a way to keep the dogs, especially Ludwig, in the world.

## **Conclusions**

Each of these two novels presents a tangled network of relationships comprising humans and dogs, inventors and inventions, lovers and rivals and friends. Each attempts to tell the story of a creature who, as an animal, a domesticated dog, and a technoscientific object, has been multiply denied agency in a human-authored world. Yet to tell such underdog stories, these novels do not choose the strategy of empowerment. They do not aim to show that a cyborg dog can be just as rational, autonomous, and intelligent as a human; they do not seek to authorize these dogs as subjects in any traditional sense. Rather, they take the opposite tack, exploring what

might be valuable and necessary about being an object, about letting another be one's master, with the understanding that mastery is indeed a reciprocal relationship that affects and binds both partners. Not only dogs, or other critters shaped by human hands, must occupy this position of being-for-the-other. To live generously, productively, and lovingly in a more-than-human world, these novels suggest, being-for-the-other, for all kinds of possible others, is a prerequisite for humans and nonhumans alike.

In their pairings of male dog plus female human—Sirius and Plaxy, Ludwig and Cleo—the texts consider how a dog might be for a human (and vice versa), and how a female might be for a male (and vice versa). These relationships invoke well-established power dynamics of species and gender. It is nevertheless possible, the novels suggest, to chart alternative courses of connection between a male and a female, between a human and a dog, that circumvent conventional hierarchies. Powerlessness is not for animals and women alone; there is a general virtue in giving oneself over to the beloved, in being-for-the-other instead of for oneself. The vulnerability of mortality, after all, cuts through all divisions of the living; Derrida affirms this “nonpower” as “the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we [humans] share with animals” (*Animal* 28), while Freccero adds that “the vulnerability is planetary; it always has been” (“Introduction” 466). Mortal finitude is thus conceived not as an individual lack, but as the foundation of mutual dependence. This state of being emphasizes connectedness rather than isolation; it valorizes companionship, with all the love, intimacy, friction, and violence it entails. Companionship means, too, that relationships are about not the joining of individuals but the creation of new beings—that “the partners do not precede their relating” (Haraway *When Species Meet* 17), and that partners of all kinds are embedded in a whole world of possible connections.

The world we live in, Stapledon and Bakis remind us, is a world of many kinds of agents. The easiest for us to recognize are the ones that look, think, and talk like us, but they are not the only ones. These novels do not end with the lives of their characters, but point outward to a lively world of connections that is much bigger, though harder to represent. To read this world of companionship, we must attune ourselves to reading traces, not just texts. Like Plaxy and Cleo, we must let those traces register upon us, submit our own lives and bodies as media for the inscription of the stories of our fellow humans and nonhumans. It is important, surely, to write one's own story, to scratch a mark onto the surface of the world. And yet, might we not imagine the world as a complex network of collaborators, a multiplicity of beings who are simultaneously author and medium? The story being written is connection. The nature of that connection—whether it will tend toward love or violence, community or exploitation—will depend on whether we, in the largest possible sense of “we,” can submit gracefully to the whole, can be for something that is not ourselves.

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