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Posthumous Afterlives: Ecstatic Readings of Post-1945 American Literature

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Melanie Masterton Sherazi

June 2015

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Katherine Kinney, Chairperson

Dr. Carole-Anne Tyler

Dr. Traise Yamamoto

Dr. Fred Moten

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2015

The Dissertation of Melanie Masterton Sherazi is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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who first taught me the meaning of hard work,  
and who have supported me at every twist and turn.

For Ben,  
whose artistic integrity inspires me to keep imagining,  
and who teaches me to hear the world differently.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Posthumous Afterlives: Ecstatic Readings of Post-1945 American Literature

by

Melanie Masterton Sherazi

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, June 2015  
Dr. Katherine Kinney, Chairperson

This dissertation explores mid-century literary texts drafted and set during the Civil Rights Movement, but which were edited and published *posthumously*, years and sometimes decades after their authors' deaths. Written by such authors as Ralph Ellison, Sylvia Plath, Carson McCullers and William Demby, these texts make visible the fundamental instability of authorial intention as they are signed by an other, the editor or executor, then made available to readers. The imbricated temporal layers of their often protracted composition times and publication histories are elaborated by their innovative narrative strategies for engaging the paradoxes of desegregation. Rethinking poststructuralist debates regarding the death of the author as an originator figure through the context of posthumous publication reorients us toward the collaborative labor of the editor and reader in processes of writing, reading, and interpretation. Posthumous texts afford the opportunity for engaging in what I term "ecstatic readings," whereby the past, loosened from an originary context, enters the present by way of the future. The "enigmatic *excess*," as Foucault names it, of the text's survival beyond its author's lifespan, promotes a dismantling of masculinist notions of presence, progress, and



closure. I draw upon Foucault's theorization of the author function, which critiques our tendencies to shape our ideas about an author's life and creative process from his or her textual remains and ideas about an era, race, gender, sexuality, and class—all of which tend to homogenize the authorial persona in order to yield a coherent portrait of the author. The author function, I contend, is at its most beguiling in the posthumous context, as it purports to stabilize the excess of unbound texts that are left unsigned by their authors. To complicate this biographical critical impulse, I call upon Barthes' notion of the author's "friendly return" as a plural figure, ever prone to dispersion, which I explore as an ecstatic dimension, rather than an anchor, of meaning. Ecstatic reading is a feminist critical practice that resists strict correspondences between an author's life and work, and champions the posthumous text's excess and relevance for engaging the complexities of postwar American life in the present.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Revisiting and Rethinking the ‘Death of the Author’	9
Beyond Late Style: The Ecstatic Temporality of the Posthumous Text	12
Chapter Overview	19
Chapter One: Rethinking Literary Inheritance: The Play of Temporal Excess in Ralph Ellison’s <i>Unbound Novel</i>	24
The Ecstatic Text That Will Not Cohere	38
‘The End is in the Beginning and Lies Far Ahead’: Subverting Historical Time	47
Resurrecting the Late Author	59
Postscript: <i>These fragments I have shored against my ruins</i>	70
Chapter Two: Signing the Other’s Signature: The Posthumous Circulation of Sylvia Plath’s <i>The Bell Jar</i>	73
Reading <i>The Bell Jar</i> Against the Grain of the Author Function	86
The Abject Temporality of <i>The Bell Jar</i> : Coming Undone in the Metropolis	94
‘The Motherly Breath of the Suburbs’: From the Suburbs to the Asylum	110
Conclusion	116
Chapter Three: The Social Subject of Life Writing in Juxtaposition with (An)other: Carson McCullers’ Posthumous Autobiography <i>Illumination and Night Glare</i>	122
‘Our Flowering Dream’: McCullers and Mercer’s Dictaphone ‘Experiments’	134
The Signature: Dialogic Sociality in <i>Illumination and Night Glare</i>	147
The Author’s Friendly Return: The Pleasures and Limits of the Biographemic	153
‘The We of Me’: Storytelling as Sociality in <i>The Member of the Wedding</i>	161
Conclusion	168
Chapter Four: The Posthumous Archive: The Ecstatic Times of William Demby’s Postwar Writing	172
The Ecstatic Period Between and Beyond <i>Beetlecreek</i> and <i>The Catacombs</i>	182
A ‘Janus-time’: Filmic Strategies for Ecstatic Times in <i>The Catacombs</i>	193
Resisting the Gaze, Playing with the Mask: <i>The Catacombs</i> ’ Doris as Black Female Spectator	203
The ‘Enigmatic Excess’ of <i>King Comus</i>	212
Conclusion	218
Conclusion: The Ecstatic Mid-Century	222
Bibliography	232

## Introduction

### Posthumous Afterlives: Ecstatic Readings of Post-1945 American Literature

*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished.*

—William Faulkner *Absalom, Absalom!*

The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author. Of course, the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions (history and courses in literature, philosophy, church discourse); he is not even the biographical hero. The author who leaves his text and comes into our life has no unity; he is a mere plural of ‘charms,’ the site of a few tenuous details, yet the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities, in which we nevertheless read death more certainly than in the epic of a fate; he is not a (civil, moral) person, he is a body.

—Roland Barthes *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*

Numerous posthumous publications written by renowned authors have hit the literary marketplace in recent years. In certain cases, the late author leaves behind express wishes for her unpublished work, while in other instances, there is no such mandate in place. But authorial intentions are narratives too that can be interpreted and rewritten, or even ignored, in the author’s absence. One of the most oft-cited exemplars in favor of violating the late author’s wishes is Franz Kafka’s posthumous *oeuvre*. The author, who perished in relative obscurity, implored his friend Max Brod to burn his writings upon his passing;<sup>1</sup> Brod, however, was convinced of their literary merit and innovation, and proceeded to publish *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), among several other works, in the wake of Kafka’s death. Brod’s labor, the labor of an other, brings the work into circulation, redeeming it (and Kafka’s name) from the flames.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Preface.” Franz Kafka. *The Castle*. 1926. NY: Oxford UP, 2009. ix. Print.

Listing just a few examples of posthumous publication from the American literary context at the turn of the twenty-first century, however, makes clear the extent to which posthumously published titles often rely upon their authors' established reputations and known body of work for their cultural legibility and marketability. Ernest Hemingway's *True at First Light* (1999) was a project that the author had abandoned in the 1950s, but which was published decades after the author's death to much criticism for its having been heavily edited by the estate to less than half of its original length.<sup>2</sup> Truman Capote's first novel, *Summer Crossing* (2012), was composed in the early 1940s, but tossed in the trashcan—the manuscript was apparently retrieved by a houseguest, and published after being discovered many decades later in a trunk by the estate. Vladimir Nabokov requested that *The Original of Laura* (2013) be destroyed owing to its unfinishedness, but his estate eventually published the text, after having kept it locked in a bank vault for forty years. Such overdetermined circumstances point to many aspects with which this dissertation engages: the complex temporal gaps between these texts' writing times and publication times; their authors' strong ties to mid-century American literary culture; as well as the often ambiguous ethical limits and aesthetic merits of acts of posthumous publication.

I begin with the basic assertion that we read a text differently when it is published posthumously. More often than not, such work is marketed and read by way of the late

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<sup>2</sup> Hemingway's numerous posthumous publications include *A Moveable Feast* (1964), published in the wake of the author's suicide in 1961, and *The Garden of Eden* (1986), a project from the 1940s, which, like *True at First Light*, was also heavily criticized for its being edited to one-third of its original length. See Joan Didion "Last Words." *The New Yorker*. 9 Nov. 1998. 74-80. Print.

author's biography and stated intentions, what Foucault terms the "author function," as a way to stabilize its excess. The author function, however, cannot fully account for the posthumous text's place in the world, and the manner in which it circulates in the wake of its author's death. Paradoxically, these texts seem both to belong and not belong to their late authors. In "What is an Author?" Foucault raises the matter of "the aesthetic principle of the work's survival, its perpetuation beyond the author's death and its enigmatic *excess* in relation to him" (105; original emphasis), but does not elaborate upon the dynamics of this ambiguous relationship. This project meditates at length upon such *excess* with a sustained exploration of the peculiar status of posthumously published texts. The estranging force of posthumously published work offers a conduit for thinking through and reimagining the imbricated relationships among narrative, authorship, and human temporality.

Drawing upon a deconstructive methodology of feminist psychoanalytic and critical race theory and philosophies of temporality and historiography, this dissertation examines the aesthetic, ethical and temporal implications of American literary texts that were authored and set in the mid-century, but were published posthumously, years and sometimes decades after the death of the author. I consider the significance that posthumously published texts by Ralph Ellison, Sylvia Plath, Carson McCullers and William Demby hold for grappling with the flux of American social identity during the postwar years and the black freedom struggle and the continued reverberations of this period in the present. In ways particular but not reducible to their situated subject positions, these writers challenge dominant postwar narratives of American democracy.

I use the term *posthumous text* flexibly to account for scenarios such as when: a text is left “unfinished” at the time of its author’s death and is subsequently edited and published posthumously; a text is published in its author’s name only *after* its author’s death, owing to its *roman à clef* elements; or a text has been declared finished by its author, but remains unpublished in the wake of its author’s death. My discussion unpacks the critical tendency to read the posthumous text in terms of its author’s biography, and often as a “failed” text when read against the author’s recognized and celebrated *oeuvre*. In deconstructive fashion, I consider the posthumous text’s restless place in the world as an overdetermined trace of its author’s remains. I advocate for what I term an “ecstatic” reading practice that foregrounds these texts’ often protracted composition and belated publication histories alongside the temporal density of the texts’ experimental narratives, which elude conventional chronological emplotment and resolution.

My theorization of ecstatic reading elaborates Heidegger’s concept of *ecstatic temporality*, whose key feature—from the Greek *ekstatikos*—is displacement. Theorizing human temporality as the beckoning horizon of being that ever pulls us into the future, Heidegger draws upon the notion of *ekstatikos* as “something that is ‘inclined to depart from’ something else, or is ‘able to displace or remove’ something” (qtd. in Wrathall and Murphey 34). The philosophy of human experience as inherently temporalized, wherein the future enters the present by way of the past (Heidegger 233), informs my ecstatic readings of these texts’ complex temporalities, both at the meta and narrative levels. My discussion extrapolates from this literature an ecstatic postwar American subject, whose experience of national belonging is one of flux, particularly in the context of the psychic

and material effects of juridical desegregation. Reading being as a mode of becoming, never fully realized or ossified, the project follows these texts' imaginings of an ecstatic postwar subjectivity. If our experience of being is inherently temporal, so too are our reading experiences. My ecstatic readings of these texts' thematics are attentive to the temporal webs woven between their composition and publication times, and the complex relationship of these timeframes to their authors' respective lifespans. Belated publication, I suggest, is a symptom of the very social ills that these authors' writings were aimed at addressing in the postwar years and during the height of the black freedom struggle.

Alongside my meta-textual consideration of the posthumous text's temporal, aesthetic, and ethical implications, each chapter performs a thematic reading of a posthumous text. In this way, my approach combines a discussion of the excessive nature of our *material belongings*, which continue to circulate in the wake of our demise, here, in the form of the posthumous text, with mid-century narratives related to *national belonging*, wherein to be is to *long* for something outside of the self. The temporal excess inherent in such affective states tangles with and presses against the authorized ledger of historical time. As Zygmunt Bauman explains, "To be 'in excess' is to be too many, or too much," the implication of which is: "'Too' is a call to restore order by passing the sentence of expulsion and banishment on whatever departs from the norm and spoils the preordained harmony" (85). With an emphasis on post-1945 American literature that registers the era's historical traumas and aftermath, my project engages the excessive temporality that necessarily precedes and protracts the Civil Rights Movement, when

those subjects considered in excess of abstract citizenship by virtue of their race, class, gender, and sexuality, disrupted the fundamentally exclusionary narrative of national belonging. These texts subtly critique heteronormative subjectivity, often by way of their deft and diverse treatments of the welling up of inner temporality, relaying the paradoxes implicit in the entry of embodied subjects into an historical narrative that figures time as linear, continuous and forward-moving, and always in the direction of progress. In doing so, these texts press against tidy narratives of a national ethos, “a preordained harmony,” and proceed instead in search of the transformative and limitless possibilities of multiplicity and excess.

This fluid interplay between the embodied subject’s “excess” and articulations of temporal experience in experimental mid-century narratives poses an alternative to Enlightenment conceptions of the Cartesian individual as autonomous and self-knowing. By extension, these texts disturb the Hegelian conception of historical time as teleological and progressive, which Benjamin has critiqued as the “time of the victors” (“Theses” VII) and Kristeva as “Father’s time” (“Women’s Time” 93). They call attention to and affirm the lived experiences of subjects whose “material, racial, and sexual aspects” have been, and continue to be, deemed “in excess of generic subject formation” (Lowe 56), which is coded as white, male, heterosexual, and propertied. The presence of the abstract citizen endorses the present and its forward-moving trajectory of progress. In contrast, what Sharon Holland terms the “strange temporality” elicited by “talk of race” (37) works at the narrative level as a defamiliarization of one’s “place” in the world: imposed from without and policed from within, but also, just as often as not,



resisted and refashioned against such abstract norms.<sup>3</sup> My engagement with embodied temporality in postwar American literature extends and repurposes Bakhtin’s provocative claim that in the novel, “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh” (84). The mid-century texts I discuss actively demonstrate at the level of style, form, and thematics, the generative excess that eludes capture by generic subject formation. Such temporally dense renderings productively exceed normative structures and notions of sovereignty, implicitly questioning the master narrative of progress.

The extended composition times and protracted publication histories of these posthumous texts amplify their radical aesthetic interventions and cultural critiques at the narrative level. Again, such temporal dynamics find compelling resonances within these texts’ experimental moves, as in their multi-vocal, non-linear, and elliptical narrations. Reading these belated, posthumous texts in the twenty-first century involves a return to the historical moment of their inception. I focus on these texts as literary responses to the upheaval and flux engendered by desegregation—an unfinished process that continues today with material and rhetorical effects that warrant our continued meditations and critiques. These publications are meaningful not solely or only because of their individual author’s biographies, or their authors’ stated or implied intentions, but because of their aesthetic innovations and critical distance during a time period often aligned with conformist norms. The project problematizes the tacit manner in which biographical

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<sup>3</sup> Holland insists upon our considering race, gender, and sexuality as inextricable from one another. Therefore, we might also consider the “strange temporality” of gender and sexuality.

readings often figure the author as a stand in for the modern subject, whose proper name authorizes his intellectual property.<sup>4</sup> Historically, this has been a highly problematic formulation for women and people of color. In particularized ways, the narratives I explore in this project defamiliarize the exclusive nature of normative citizenship, inasmuch as at the meta-level, posthumously published texts put pressure on the logic of ownership at large.

All texts are always already posthumous insofar as we will all die. Although all texts outlast their authors they will not necessarily be published, remain in print, be circulated, taught, shared, or read. In this sense, the project focuses on the collaborative and necessary labor of the other in sustaining the posthumous text's afterlives. What ethical obligations toward the other arise in the wake of the author's death? What calls are made upon our hospitality as we host the other by way of our reading and writing practices? This project is invested in posthumous publication as a social practice with the capacity to perform an ethics of care for the other. Heidegger observes that being is inherently temporalized, and "*temporality reveals itself as the meaning of authentic care.*" (374; original italics). There is a poignant potential for such care that presents itself in the posthumous context, blurring the line between self and other. These dynamics work differently, however, as my chapters will demonstrate, according to material circumstances, many of which revolve around the force of the author function and its perpetuation.

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<sup>4</sup> See Derrida on the proper name (*Of Grammatology* 109).

## Revisiting and Rethinking the 'Death of the Author'

Barthes' 1968 polemic "The Death of the Author" rails against the assumption that "the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us" (143; original emphasis). Barthes' critique takes on added resonance in the case of the literal death of the author, as the posthumous text is often read as a direct *communiqué* from its late author and as having the power to shine a revelatory light on his known body of work. Delivered in the aftermath of the critical turn inaugurated by Barthes' essay, Foucault's lecture "What is an Author?" (1969) carefully traces the Western genealogy of the concept of the author to the nineteenth-century emergence of copyright law, and so to bourgeois values of ownership and the implementation of the juridical structure that supports such claims. Upon destabilizing the culturally-constructed notion of the author as an autonomous individual, Foucault lays bare the delimiting effects of subscribing to the author function.

This study of posthumous publication builds upon Foucault's articulation and critique of the author function, whose four characteristics he summarizes as follows:

the 'author function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does

not refer, purely, and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (130-31)

These material and contingent descriptors are rooted in phallogocentric bourgeois conceptions of authorship and acquisition. Rethinking the death of the author as a father/originator figure through the context of posthumous publication makes visible the collaborative labor of the editor and reader in processes of meaning-making and the social fabric of all writing.

Derived from the Latin *posth*, meaning “last,” and *humus* meaning “ground,” the term posthumous is defined as both as “occurring, awarded, or appearing after the death of the originator,” and as “(of a child) born after the death of its father” (OED). These definitions reinforce the value of the Foucauldian critique of the author as originating center, as the posthumous work is legible only in relationship to what Kristeva, citing Joyce, has termed “Father’s time.” Elaborating how women have been aligned with the cyclical and the eternal, Kristeva performs a feminist critique of Father’s time, which is characterized by “project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: time as departure, progression and arrival” (“Women’s Time” 193). She extends such concepts to the patriarchal imposition of language as logical and sequential. These notions resonate with Barthes’ critique of traditional readings of the text’s temporal status: “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in

the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child” (“The Death of the Author” 145; original emphases). Recognizing the patriarchal paradigm of father/originator and progeny/text and its oppressive sway over considerations of the posthumous text, puts pressure on the imbricated logic of ownership and telos, with its restrictive effects on the play of meaning.

As described in the epigraph to this project, Barthes theorizes a means of avoiding an entrenched reliance upon the author as father/originator by welcoming his amicable or friendly return as a plural figure, ever prone to dispersion (*Sade* 9). In *The Death and Return of the Author*, Seán Burke responds to Barthes’ generative methodology, observing that:

while the traditional biographer will seek to mimic the impetus of a life, to register it according to certain representative proportions, the *biographeme* breaks with the teleology implicit in this lambent narrative movement. Events are not connected to imply any destiny or purpose in the course of a life, rather the *biographemes* are the shards of any such forward movement, those velleities that are passed over in the more frenetic, directed movement of the footprint-following biographer. The *biographeme* arrests the progressional narrative of biography proper, its insistence on reading themes of development and decline into the empirical contents of an author’s life. (39)

I turn to the *biographeme*, the sensual detail or whimsical allusion, throughout the project as an alternative methodology to traditional biographical criticism. To take Barthes’ and

Foucault's respective meditations on authorship seriously and to apply them to the case of posthumous publication is not to undermine any given author's labor or life experience, but rather to open the field of meaning. Such a move unfetters the text from the ways in which the author's life and authorized body of work have been appropriated as a function that stabilizes the posthumous text and its place in an existing body of work.

### Beyond Late Style: The Ecstatic Temporality of the Posthumous Text

Paul Ricoeur posits that "time only becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative" (Vol. 1 3); the texts in this project resist an easy chronological ordering, both at the level of narrative and publication, thereby emphasizing how temporal experience eludes articulation, even as subjects seek to structure their experiences through stories rooted and recorded in time. Philosopher David Hoy usefully differentiates between our public, shared sense of *time* as objective "clock," or calendar time, and *temporality*, our personal, lived experience, what he terms "the time of our lives." Theorists of temporality maintain that a notion of time as a seamless, inevitable continuity has a pervasive, standardizing effect on our sense of the world that is often oppressive and at odds with our private sense of inner temporality, for there are as many temporalities as there are beings in the world. Innovative literary texts, with their renderings of our private and dynamic sense of lived temporality, hold the potential to disrupt the causality and chronology of what Heidegger terms datable time, or "public-time" (459). In this way, human temporality is always already in excess of linear

time, with its conventional reliance on causality, quantitative succession, and progress, and literature is a site to explore the subversive potential of temporalized, embodied experience. This critique of authorized, historical time holds significance for critical theories of social identity and national belonging, and the stories we tell about those modes of social identity.

Our shared sense of ordinary clock time implicitly endorses what Nietzsche critiques as the *monumental* history of “the active and powerful man” (14), or what Benjamin similarly refers to as the “history of the victors” (“Theses” VII). Nietzsche poses a challenge to the disciplinary presentation of history as a pure science, objecting not merely to the equation of the past with facts, but to the dominant Hegelian view of his time that figured history as a linear process following objective laws that are unaffected by man’s input or actions. Nietzsche affirms that “history belongs to the living man” for multiple reasons, but among them: “so far as he suffers and is in need of liberation” (14). Because history-making is always a retrospective activity, he advocates for a critical view that comes to fruition when one is willing “to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worth condemning” (21). The critical process of differentiation dispels a master narrative, which is, in turn, questioned and even condemned. Because the past is not held up as sacred, immutable and preordained, it emerges as a living history, capable of inspiring creation and action.

Building on this critical conversation, Derrida performs an extended critique in *Margins of Philosophy* of the metaphysical tradition of *presence*. He proceeds by

unpacking the privileging of speech over writing in Western philosophy, as the former was thought to be aligned with the presence of the speaker, and so was considered inherently authentic. Writing, on the other hand, was seen as secondary and removed from the self—a mere representation of reality. Derrida takes up this logocentric formulation in order to question the foundation upon which presence rests.<sup>5</sup> A logocentric approach is not sustainable, he contends, for speech is as subject to spatial and temporal deferral, or *différance*, as writing. Speech, in other words, like writing, is as given toward iterability and citationality, which exposes the impossibility, in speech or in writing, of guaranteeing and securing one's intention. Derrida further observes that the signature, by metonymic extension, stands in for the text and endorses our presence and consent, but is as prone to slippage and citationality as speech.<sup>6</sup> This project considers the logic and limits of the authorial signature in detail by focusing on this gap; such effects are heightened by the role of an other, the editor/executor, who signs on the late author's behalf.

Derrida's critique demonstrates how the tradition of presence authorizes the abstract citizen and his active role in historical time, while relegating women and people of color to the margins of society and philosophy, as outside of, or frozen in, time. Such

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<sup>5</sup> See Derrida. "Signature Event Context." Derrida critiques J.L. Austin's concept in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) of the "performative utterance," which demonstrates a belief in language's ability to do something: to perform and create a certain reality, based upon a set of circumstances, as in a bride and groom saying, "I do." Derrida, in contrast, focuses on the sign's iterability—its endless ability to be repeated in new contexts. For Derrida, there is no full correspondence between the sign and the signifier, nor is meaning ever fixed in time or space. My project privileges this latter deconstructive approach to signification.

<sup>6</sup> See Derrida "Signature Event Context" 328



an insight has productive implications for thinking about literary time and temporality, specifically in post-1945 American literature, with its emphasis on undoing hierarchies and narrating micro-histories that run counter to hegemonic narratives. Though this mode of literary resistance comes to the fore most obviously in 1960s literature and beyond, I cite an interplay between modernism and postmodernism throughout my discussion that disrupts a causal, chronological unfolding.

Drawing upon the useful distinction between *time*—both clock time and the historical time it allows—and *temporality*, we can more fully consider the vital and subversive role that articulations of inner temporality play in modernist and contemporary American literature. Importantly, Ursula Heise and Linda Hutcheon among others have noted that the realist novel's technique of temporal succession arose alongside the emergence of history as a discipline.<sup>7</sup> The rigors of historical *time* are in keeping with the progressive, linear demands that the realist novel have a clear beginning, middle, and end. In contrast, modernist literature, even as it wrestles with the implications and omnipresence of clock time, resists temporal succession by way of its privileging of human *temporality*, as with the use of stream of consciousness and multiple narrators. Such a shift further fragments and explodes in postmodern literature, wherein reality itself is suspect, and ontological certainties are thrown into question.

In conversation with these literary responses to shifting ideologies of time and temporality, I extend, in deconstructive fashion, the dynamics of perpetual temporal

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<sup>7</sup> See Heise *Chronoschisms* 1-11 and Hutcheon "The Pastime of Past Time: Fiction, History, Historiographical Metafiction." *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 105-123

displacement to an ecstatic reading of the posthumous text. Such a practice embraces the posthumous text's tendency to break endlessly with a given context and reconfigures our dominant attitudes toward the death of the author. As Barbara Johnson reminds us, "The 'death of the author' names the unknowability of the gap between what a text says and what an author might have intended, even when the author is not literally dead. Again, it is a questioning of the self-presence implied by the concept of 'life' as 'meaning'" (39). Recognizing the patriarchal implications of the canonization of literature and the attendant presence accorded to its "great authors," prompts us to put pressure on the conventional logic of authorship and ownership, with its delimiting effects on critical inquiry.

These matters bear great relevance regarding notions of normative citizenship and legitimacy. Because these posthumous texts are, in effect, unauthorized, published as they are in the wake of the author's demise, our reliance on the author function and signature as anchors of meaning is unsettled and reconfigured, affording active reading modes and opportunities for play. My aim, in turn, is to showcase how temporal excess in experimental narratives privileges the creative forces of imagination, desire, and sense memory, thereby opening up greater potentiality for meaning-making and disruptions of monological discourses of presence and the proper. Delving into the workings of temporal excess at the narrative level deepens my exploration of the questions raised by posthumously published work. Accordingly, my dissertation project probes the questions raised by the posthumous text's uncertain status and its excessive relationship to time and temporality, having "survived" its author.

This dissertation troubles theories of origin(ality), authenticity, intention, coherence, and progress—concepts that often underlie biographically-driven analyses of posthumous texts as though they are transparent. I facilitate a discussion around the ways in which we encounter texts that return to us anew—in material fashion and in a given time and place—in spite of their author’s demise, and so unmoored from an originary writing context and artistic intention or vision, whether expressed or assumed. I extend the work performed by narratologists who have theorized the relationships among time, narrative, and mortality. Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” for instance, places an encounter with one’s own mortality at the heart of rituals of storytelling and narrative practices. He provocatively avers, “What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (101). The posthumous text makes visible the imbricated nature of writing, reading, and death. Drawing upon Benjamin’s claim, Peter Brooks observes how plot demonstrates the means by which we order and derive meaning from our temporal experience. He likewise emphasizes the pleasure we obtain from postponement, detours, and the prolongation of closure, modeling our own desire to ward off death and to read back retrospectively for meaning once we reach the “end.” In this way, narrative allows us to experience what we cannot otherwise be guaranteed to experience: a perspective beyond death from which we might make sense of our own mortality. My project is related to, but ultimately departs from the considerable body of critical work about “late” style, final works, and endings, by such theorists as Edward Said, Peter Brooks, and Frank Kermode, as my readings complicate the paradigm of linking an author’s evolving style with teleological notions of aging and artistic maturity.

Importantly, Ursula Heise critiques Benjamin, Brooks and Kermode for their shared failure to acknowledge the cultural contexts that invariably shape human experiences of time and mortality (*Chronoschisms* 48). Noting these narratologists' implied recourse to a universal, or transhistorical, theory of time and mortality, Heise insists upon foregrounding the culturally-specific contexts that influence our perceptions of time and temporality. Heise articulates how temporal expression works differently across the literary movements of realism, modernism, and postmodernism. I bear her insights in mind as I perform my own retrospective readings and consider how texts circulate and signify distinctly across time and space. The temporal thickness of the mid-century moment manifests itself in literary style and form, namely modernism(s) and postmodernism(s) and the interplay between these movements. Far from establishing a binary between modernism(s) and postmodernism(s), the texts I explore in this project initiate heterogeneous blurrings and crossings of aesthetic innovation, specifically in their handlings of temporality and the formation of social identity.

The generativity of loosening the seemingly direct and proprietary correspondence between the author-originator and his text-progeny emerges in the many hauntings and excesses raised by the posthumous context. Heidegger theorizes that our being does not end precisely with our death: there is an excess that lingers beyond our death, what he calls our *demise*, as we endure in material traces and in others' minds, and so in uncontained temporalities that refuse the twinned logic of chronology and causality. I take the posthumous text as an exceptional field of possibility for contemplating and broadening the scope and range of our critical practices. By way of my consideration of

the posthumous text, this project performs a reckoning with the material traces left behind in the wake of these authors' demise, even as it considers the resonances between our belongings and notions of national belonging in the mid-century context and its temporally dense retention and aftermath. The intertextual thematics of texts, both "early" and "late," in each author's *oeuvre*, flaunt the temporal excess of embodied human experience and the generative desire to give voice to it in literary form. Taking a cue from Barthes' manifesto "From Work to Text," I trouble biographical conceptions of the monological posthumous *work*, by privileging the abundant possibilities of the plural posthumous *text*.

### Chapter Overview

My first chapter engages Ralph Ellison's author function, which has been plagued by his public persona as a purportedly failed black activist. I explore how this so-called failure has been projected onto the characterization of his failure to finish his second novel. Following the success of his debut novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison worked for forty years on his second novel, which orbits around a 1955 setting as it narrativizes the paradoxes of miscegenation in the national imaginary. When Ellison died in 1994, he left no express wishes or instructions regarding the thousands of pages he had generated. John F. Callahan was appointed as Ellison's literary executor, and over the course of five years, he edited Ellison's material into a 350-page novel, *Juneteenth* (1999), and then, a decade later, he published the 1,100-page text *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010), with the aid of co-editor Adam Bradley. I consider how these publications, alongside the

project's unwieldy archive, constitute what I term an *unbound novel*, whose protracted writing time and belated publication history at the meta-textual level, amplify its temporal thematics of inheritance and legitimacy at the narrative level. Drawing upon my archival work with the author's papers at the Library of Congress, I propose that we embrace this posthumous text's compelling *excess* in order to expand our readings beyond the parameters of generic conventions and biographical intentions: readings that have, to date, dominated the critical discourse surrounding Ellison's project. Owing to its undecidable forms and narrative thematics, Ellison's unbound novel imagines myriad, improvisational possibilities for inhabiting one's "place" in America (and his plural role in literary history)—always within the context of the nation-state, but ultimately existing in a refashioned, even defiant, state of excess.

Whereas Ralph Ellison's legacy has been troubled by his public persona as a purportedly failed black activist, my second chapter problematizes the fact that considerations of Sylvia Plath's work have been obsessed with the personal and domestic. Her novel *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in England in 1963, just a month before her death, then posthumously published in England in 1967, and in the United States in 1971, in Plath's name. *The Bell Jar*'s overdetermined publication history poses compelling questions regarding the ethics, logic and limits of the authorial signature. Significantly, Plath's express wishes were to avoid publication in the United States owing to her novel's *roman à clef* elements; nevertheless, *The Bell Jar*'s eventual posthumous publication in her name with the explicit authorization of her estranged husband, turned executor, Ted Hughes, instantiates how someone else always

signs our signature in the end.<sup>8</sup> I pair *The Bell Jar*'s excessive publication narrative with a discussion of its abject temporal thematics. The novel invokes the pervasive Cold War language of surveillance as it demonstrates the self-policing of (white) femininity. Kristeva's theorization of abjection offers a provocative feminist approach with which to engage the parameters drawn around 1950s white femininity. What I term "abject temporality" operates in *The Bell Jar* to critique ubiquitous patriarchal structures, as such models are predicated upon the stable "presence" of the abstract, autonomous citizen. By repeatedly turning the female body inside out, Plath externalizes and troubles the purportedly knowable contours of selfhood, including the knowable figure of Plath herself, who is consistently invoked as a means to decode the novel.

My third chapter turns to the social labor of posthumous publication with a discussion of Carson McCullers' collaboratively-crafted, posthumously-published autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999). Following a debilitating stroke, McCullers dictated the content of *Illumination and Night Glare* to various friends and nurses in the months before her death. Though composed in 1967, the autobiography was considered too fragmentary in content and form, and was not published until 1999, following the inclusion of supplementary archival research and editorial crafting by a McCullers scholar, Carlos Dews. I read the sociality of *Illumination and Night Glare*'s composition, publication and thematics in dialogue with that of her novel *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), to emphasize processes of collaboration and (re)configuration. Drawing upon my archival work with the Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers

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<sup>8</sup> See Derrida "Signature Event Context" 330

Collection at Columbus State University, I set McCullers' posthumous autobiography in conversation with her 1958 therapy sessions with Dr. Mary Mercer, which were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed as writing "experiments." *Illumination and Night Glare* bears an irreducible relationship to the life writing McCullers generated in the 1950s and 60s. Rather than deploying *Illumination and Night Glare* as a key to unlocking her fiction, this chapter develops Barthes' conception of the author's plural return by way of the *biographeme*, which moves us away from the model of the author as a father/originator and toward a plural figure.

My final chapter addresses the as-yet unpublished final novel *King Comus* of the late African American expatriate author William Demby. Demby began this ambitious project, which combines elements of the neo-slave narrative and time travel narrative, in the mid-1980s and completed it in 2007. When Demby passed away in 2013, however, the novel had still not found a publisher. *King Comus'* expansive temporal and historiographical project and its extended writing time of twenty years, recall Ellison's existential life project. In contrast to Ellison's manuscript, however, Demby considered his novel finished before his passing. I pursue the question of whether a text is "finished" without its being published and circulated. The chapter returns to the mid-century with extended readings of Demby's first two novels *Beetlecreek* (1950) and *The Catacombs* (1965), and with findings from my archival work with the late author's papers in Italy documenting his work as a journalist, screenwriter, and translator in postwar Rome. Demby's legacy both brings together and expands my project's broader concerns with authorship, social identity, national belonging, and ecstatic temporality.



If all reading and, by extension, writing, as Benjamin suggests in “The Storyteller,” is directed toward making sense of our own finitude, the posthumous text offers a complex rubric for contemplating social identity in and across historically-contingent times and spaces. The implications of these belated mid-century publications are amplified and elaborated by a consideration of the postwar period and the black freedom struggle’s continued relevance in our present. An ecstatic reading practice embraces these nested temporalities and makes room for these authors’ mobile returns by way of their lived experiences, while also recognizing that our reading and writing practices should not end there, but should always pursue, as Barbara Johnson advocates in *The Wake of Deconstruction*, those restless, indeterminate spaces wherein new meanings are perpetually reborn and struggled over.

## Chapter One

### Rethinking Literary Inheritance: The Play of Temporal Excess in Ellison's Unbound Novel

You accept the fact that you're living in an ambiguous area, down in the fluid flux that underlies the patterned processes which those above term history.<sup>9</sup>

–Ralph Ellison

Following the incredible success of his National Book Award-winning debut novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison began drafting what he referred to as the “Hickman novel” in the mid-1950s; he continued composing the project into the 1990s, generating thousands of pages of drafts and notes in the process. When Ellison passed in 1994 at the age of 81, he left no instructions regarding his novel in progress, apart from his desire to have his papers housed at the Library of Congress. His widow Fanny Ellison appointed John F. Callahan, a scholar of African American literature and a longtime friend, as Ellison's literary executor. When she ushered Callahan into her late husband's study in Harlem, he expected to find a nearly finished manuscript of Ellison's long-awaited second novel, but what he discovered instead were daunting stacks of papers and multiple file cabinets housing thousands of drafts and handwritten notes: what Callahan describes as the “disparate, protean remains of Ralph Ellison's unfinished second novel” (“The Making of *Juneteenth*” 187). For the next five years, Callahan edited “oft-revised, sometimes reconceived scenes and episodes” into what he terms “their most probable development and progression” (*Juneteenth* 365). The result was the 350-page novel

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<sup>9</sup> an unpublished note from the Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (I:54/4)

*Juneteenth* (1999), culled from Book II of Ellison's three-part project. Ten years later, Callahan and co-editor Adam Bradley published an 1,100-page "scholar's edition," *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010), which includes representative drafts of all three sections, interspersed with editorial notes. This chapter considers how the "disparate, protean remains" of what I term Ellison's "unbound novel," circulate in the overdetermined domain of posthumous publication.

The archival materials related to the second novel further complicate the ambiguous status of these posthumous publications. The papers related to the "Hickman novel" became available to the public in 2010, and are arranged at the Library of Congress *episodically*, per Ellison's revision process, that is, not according to their chronological drafting, which is almost entirely undocumented. To engage this chaotic archive is to find oneself awash in an ocean of words. The folders related to Ellison's project are bursting with scores of handwritten, typed, and computer-generated drafts, as well as piles of Ellison's notes scrawled on the backs of envelopes and scraps of paper. This disorderly compilation defamiliarizes and obscures any notion of an original or progressive scene of authorship, and deflects a chronologically-driven archival method. Instead, the archive presents us with a creative process, rather than with the sum parts of an organic whole or product.<sup>10</sup> How do we engage the chaotic archive in relationship to the posthumously published variants of Ellison's second novel, *Juneteenth* and *Three Days*? How might we conceive of and read a text that has multiple forms?

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<sup>10</sup> *Three Days* co-editor Adam Bradley traces Ellison's material writing practice of his second novel in detail in *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (2010)

These forms are necessarily imbricated with one another, but are ultimately irreducible, and so operate as what I term an unbound novel. This unbound novel's protracted composition time, multiple posthumous publications, and exploded archival materials, challenge and invite us to transgress the borders of our normative readings practices of "finished" texts. By unbound, I refer both to a materiality that resists a stable, singular form or edition, and to the (un)binding processes and effects of court-ordered desegregation that are woven into the novel's 1955 setting.<sup>11</sup> The thematics of Ellison's unbound novel demonstrate the tension between *assimilation* to—or being bound up with, or belonging to—the historical time of the nation-state, and a *resistance* to normative citizenship—or being unbound, or in excess of such belonging, which is sometimes forced, and sometimes self-selected and embraced. At the meta-level, the unbound novel's extended composition time and unsettled publication history perform a radical resistance to binding that eludes authorial intention and generic conventions.

Ellison's unbound novel affords us opportunities for reading and meaning-making that contribute to the broader project of engaging the role of the racialized past in our present and the future. Ellison's project has three distinct sections that cluster around a "circa 1955" assassination attempt:<sup>12</sup> Book I is told from the first-person, hardboiled perspective of a white investigative reporter and WWII veteran, Welborn McIntyre, who is witness to and investigates the attempted assassination of a race-baiting US Senator,

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<sup>11</sup> In her discussion of Palestine, Judith Butler declares that "if the state is what 'binds,' it is also clearly what can and does unbind" (5). See Butler, Judith and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (2007)

<sup>12</sup> This summary is drawn from the representative drafts of Ellison's unbound manuscript that Callahan and Bradley curated for the posthumous publication of *Three Days*.

Adam Sunraider, who is shot several times on the Senate floor. Book II, which has been aptly characterized as Faulknerian in style and which makes up the majority of the content published as the novel *Juneteenth*, has an antiphonal, stream of consciousness structure that gives voice to the hospital-bedside reunion of the wounded Senator and the black Southern preacher, Reverend A.Z. Hickman.<sup>13</sup> Senator Sunraider was orphaned as a newborn baby by his white mother and never meets his father, who is assumed to be black. Hickman names the baby Bliss, and primes the boy to play an integral role as a protégé evangelist in Hickman’s traveling revivalist church services. Book III tracks Reverend Hickman’s time in Washington D.C., Georgia, and Oklahoma, and is narrated in the third-person. Its timeframe predates those of Books I and II, as Hickman reconnects with figures from his own and Sunraider’s past in an effort to uncover the rumored assassination plot against the Senator that comes to pass in Book I. These three books share polyphonic, non-linear reverberations with one another, even as their forms remain permeable and unsettled, as witnessed by the teeming archive and posthumously published variants of the project.

Ellison’s unbound novel chronicles in non-linear fashion both the exuberant and the violent nature of twentieth-century American culture; it is a vibrant, visionary text that requires and rewards what I term an ecstatic reading practice. An ecstatic reading practice begins with the deconstructive premise that all texts are inherently prone to

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<sup>13</sup> This reference to Book II’s intertextual play with Faulknerian style and temporality is in stark contrast to Norman Podhoretz’s deplorable assessment that Ellison found himself in “despair at this literary enslavement [to Faulkner] into which some incorrigible defect in his nature had sold him—and to a Southern master, at that!”

*ekstasis*, or displacement. Deconstruction posits that the text is always a manner of a saying, rather than a said. The posthumous text amplifies these dynamics of deferral and slippage as such texts circulate in a manner that both depends upon and effaces the late author's presence. In other words, posthumously published work often relies upon the author function for its marketability and legibility, but the act of publishing in the wake of the late author's demise emphasizes a lack of consent that the authorial signature is meant to endorse. Such paradoxical excess escapes entrenched attitudes regarding authorship and ownership that implicitly shape our reading and writing practices. An ecstatic approach views this excess as a generative, unsettling force; in this way, the "enigmatic *excess*" (105) as Foucault terms it, of the work's "survival" and "perpetuation" eludes cooptation by the author function. As discussed in the Introduction, Foucault theorizes the function of the author as a tool for disciplining the text, whereby the author's biography and stated intentions operate as the anchor of meaning and the sign of authenticity, and so as a means of homogenization. An ecstatic reading subverts such standardization, here by way of a consideration of Ellison's unbound novel's interest in the unbound, ecstatic subject—as figured by Bliss/Sunraider's unknowable paternity and masquerading. I set such thematics in dialogue with the ethical, aesthetic, and temporal implications of its posthumously published incarnations, *Juneteenth* and *Three Days*, which were selected from the archive, but are irreducible to its disorderly contents.

When the 350-page "novel" *Juneteenth* was published in 1999 as a "reader's edition"—largely culled and edited by Callahan from the 1972 typescript of Book II of

Ellison's epic three-part project—reviews were mixed, if not mostly negative. The lukewarm response to *Juneteenth* signals the ambivalence inherent in our attitudes toward the posthumous text, both in regards to its aesthetics and the ethical implications of its often highly visible editorial imprint. In *Time* magazine, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. lauded the book as “a *tour de force* of untutored eloquence. Ellison sought no less than to create a Book of Blackness”; whereas others, like Louis Menand, who called *Juneteenth* a “Frankenstein's monster” in his *New York Times* review, critiqued Callahan for having excised and arranged a relatively small segment of the three-part project. The latter critical claim was waged on the grounds that *Juneteenth* is not in keeping with Ellison's grander vision, which has been compared to Faulkner's and Proust's multi-volume projects; here, the weighty invocation of other (white, male) canonical authors is used to defend Ellison's unsettled author function. With his endorsement of Ellison's “Book of Blackness,” Gates accepts the authorial signature as legitimate and recognizes the product as an authentic “book,” in keeping with the traditional province of biographical criticism. In contrast, Menand calls attention to the role of the editor, figuring Callahan as Dr. Frankenstein, who stitches together various parts that only masquerade as an organic whole. *Juneteenth*'s ambivalent critical reception makes clear that Ellison's unbound novel performs a refusal, irrespective of its author's or its editor's stated or implied wishes, to behave as a progressive, linear narrative. Because of the author's inability to “sign off” on such editorial decisions, the posthumous text takes on the status of the bastard text, related to, but set apart from, the author's recognized *oeuvre*—a concept to which I return later in the chapter by way of the text's own thematics.

The publication of *Juneteenth* was an incomplete gesture that from its inception necessitated another attempt at the project's and the author's posthumous redemption from failure. Ten years after *Juneteenth*, Callahan and co-editor Bradley published representative drafts of the unbound novel's three sections in *Three Days Before the Shooting*. *Three Days* aims, like *Juneteenth* before it, to redeem Ellison's unfinished project from its status as a failed undertaking, but the text is broken up by supplemental editorial notes that lead the reader through the text, as though she could not find her way without the editor/executor's guidance. These notes recall the Derridean *supplement* as that which augments, but is never fully integrated into a totality; as such, *Three Days* enters into an ecstatic rapport with *Juneteenth* and the exploded archive.<sup>14</sup> In the Introduction to *Three Days*, Callahan maintains that the abundance of material and drafts that Ellison left behind "testify to the massive and sustained effort Ellison exerted upon his fiction, but also to his ultimate failure to complete his manuscript so long in progress" (xvi). The branding of this manuscript as a failure is here tied to its being "so long in progress," tethering a progressive notion of time both to the novel and its writing process. Ellison's unbound novel, however, is not beholden to chronology and cause and effect, nor does it mirror the "natural" life process of aging and artistic "maturity." This extended, 1,100-page posthumous publication pays homage to Ellison's labor, even as it highlights the perceived lack attributed to the unfinished work. Callahan and Bradley's detailed notes call attention to the presence of their own authorial signatures, signaling the collaborative labor of posthumous publication and its supplementarity.

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<sup>14</sup> See Derrida *Of Grammatology* 144



Biographically-driven criticism, rooted in the great authors paradigm, has dominated critical approaches to Ellison's work, particularly critical accounts of his "failure" to complete his second novel.<sup>15</sup> Such assessments, however, raise important questions regarding what constitutes a novel and why it is that we insist upon the author's imprimatur and the strictures of form, especially closure, to render such an object legible in the eyes of its readers, the academy, and the marketplace. Such a picture is rendered even more complex when "unfinished" material undergoes posthumous publication. Countering what has been the tendency to enact a melancholic, biographical criticism of Ellison's unfinished final work, the forever unassimilable object, an ecstatic reading flouts the demands of teleological progression and resolution.<sup>16</sup> Turning our focus to this unbound novel's narrative investment in ecstatic temporality registers its profound critique of recorded American history. The unbound novel privileges, as this chapter's epigraph states, an underground, polyphonic history that dwells in "an ambiguous area, down in the fluid flux that underlies the patterned processes which those above term history." Such mid-century thematic priorities regarding *living* in ambiguity, in fluidity and in flux, take on heightened temporal resonances when read in terms of the novel's

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<sup>15</sup> See Bradley *Ralph Ellison in Progress* 211

<sup>16</sup> I use this term in the Freudian sense, whereby the melancholic perpetually mourns the lost object/other that cannot be integrated into experience, as is the case with successful mourning. See "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)*. NY Vintage Classics, 2001. Such readings do not take a self-consciously melancholic approach; rather, they telegraph this sentiment by characterizing Ellison's second novel as an unresolved failure. See Callahan, Bradley, Crouch, Rampersad, Rogin, Podhoretz, etc., for examples. For an applied reading of melancholy and race in Ellison's work, see Anne Cheng's essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*.

excessive composition time and posthumous publication contexts.<sup>17</sup> An ecstatic approach offers a reinvigorated sense of Ellison's role in African American literature by way of a return to his aesthetics and their political import and by way of the freeplay of this unbound novel.

Ellison's unbound novel exudes the raw energy of the chaotic text, and models a reckoning with historical time that refuses phallogentric transcendental claims to mastery, unity, and closure. While the response to such chaos has been to order and tame it in terms of what is "known" about the late author's biography, previously published work, and stated intentions—themselves texts that can be read—such an approach forecloses the polysemic excess inherent in all texts; this chapter celebrates the manner in which posthumously published texts flaunt this poststructuralist insight and ask us to imagine elsewhere, other times and places, in terms of setting, composition and publication. An unmooring of linear time, presence, and ownership is fitting for a posthumous text like Ellison's, comprised as it is of revisions and reiterations that resist cohesion, and whose thematics point us toward the ever-morphing paradoxes of American social identity. Ellison's text is both more and less than a novel, but never wholly or only one, owing to its inchoate nature and episodic drafts, which provocatively deny both a chronological mapping and reading experience.

There is a problematic narrative of redemption at work in the editorial handling and critical reception of Ellison's unwieldy novel whose temporal logic has its roots in

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<sup>17</sup> Eight excerpts from the manuscript were published during Ellison's lifetime, most famously "Cadillac Flambé" (1973).

providential history and narratives of progress, and which is a defense against failure. Adam Bradley, co-editor of Ellison's *Three Days*, concludes that "it has become something of a critical fashion, both during the last decades of Ellison's life and in the years since his death, to diagnose the causes of what many perceived as Ellison's signal failure" (*Ralph Ellison in Progress* 211). The tendency to diagnose the causes of Ellison's ostensible "failure" underscores a paradigmatic reliance on the author function to stabilize the excessive nature of the posthumous text within such narratives. This editorial and critical enterprise reveals a Romantic inclination to resurrect the late author by way of his posthumous text as a means to steady his unsettled author function. I read against the melancholic trend to brand Ellison's novel a "failure" that implicitly mirrors his "failed" politics in the Black Arts Movement.<sup>18</sup> Such biographical readings indict Ellison for having transgressed normative expectations for a work's composition time and completion, revisiting more explicit critiques of his not being a more outspoken political figure in the 1960s and 70s. I focus instead on the subversive implications of the novel's ambitious formal and stylistic reckoning with American culture and identity at the narrative level. Though Ellison's novel initially seems to perform its own redemptive moves by way of Senator Sunraider's reconciliation with his black surrogate father, Hickman—a reunion that gestures toward assimilation and resolution—the project's

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<sup>18</sup> Ellison was routinely criticized in scholarly discourse and confronted during speaking engagements on campuses. He was called an "Uncle Tom" at an appearance by a young Black Panther Party member in 1967—an incident that brought him to tears (Rampersad 439-40). Bradley notes that an entire 1970 issue of *Black World* was dedicated to Ellison and his politics. Ellison was excoriated as an "Uncle Tom" numerous times in the issue (*Ellison* 57-8).

overdetermined and mobile “ending” and its restless forms remain productively ambivalent.

The sustained tendency toward biographical criticism in Ellison scholarship, nonetheless, indicates the degree to which Ellison’s unwieldy novel rests uneasily alongside his fraught author function as a black writer who did not overtly champion black literary nationalism. Ellison’s uneven, contradictory reception within African American literary history oscillates between his literary achievement with *Invisible Man* on the one hand, and his reticence to champion a black radical aesthetic on the other. The effect of Ellison’s primary artistic triumph resting with his first novel is reinforced by the fact that the first Ellison biography, Lawrence Jackson’s *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (2002), focuses on the author’s early life and significantly finishes with the success of *Invisible Man* in the early 1950s. Arnold Rampersad’s 2007 biography of Ellison spans the author’s entire life, but often positions Ellison as a narcissist, adding fuel to the narrative of failure that is projected onto the second novel’s unfinishedness.

Though the posthumous publications culled from Ellison’s unbound novel, *Juneteenth* and *Three Days*, arguably attempt to redeem the author from critical assessments of failure by showcasing the richness of material that Ellison was crafting and revising through the years, the editorial commentary accompanying these posthumous publications is melancholic. The effect is to assure the reader that she will neither find wholeness, nor satisfaction in these posthumous variants, owing to the always absent endorsement or signature of the late author who never completed his task. As such, Ellison’s unbound novel elicits a paradoxical response: there is a frustrated

effort to revive the author by way of the posthumous text in order to cast off the mantle of failure—of Ellison’s politics and his incomplete second novel—even as this is always already a futile gesture, when the author function, conflicted as Ellison’s is, is relied upon to authenticate and anchor our readings. Whether overtly or not, we are aware, perhaps “on the lower frequencies” (*Invisible Man* 581), of someone signing the other’s signature.<sup>19</sup> There is a gap, in other words, between the late author and the posthumous signature that exposes the incompleteness of all signatures. The signature, signed by the executor on the author’s behalf, must be guaranteed by the author function, according to the logic of ownership. The concept of copyright and ownership that inheres in the author function recalls the Derridean notion of the proper name, as in property, propriety, and self-presence.<sup>20</sup> Self-presence has traditionally been founded upon ownership of one’s self, one’s family, one’s past, one’s property, and so on: all key themes taken up in African American literary texts and history, written by and about African-descended peoples who were themselves bought and sold and named as property under the master’s name. Ellison’s unbound novel reckons with these claims to ownership and legitimacy at the narrative level, just as it performs related work at the meta-level with its excessive, mobile status, eschewing the strictures of form and escaping authorial intentionality and mastery.

In contrast to a dependence on an author/originator, a poststructuralist notion of authorship finds Ellison enigmatically *in* the text, not pulling the strings *behind it*,

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<sup>19</sup> See Derrida “Signature Event Context” 328

<sup>20</sup> See Derrida *Of Grammatology* 109

situating the text as plural rather than expressive of a given reality. In turn, the author, too, returns as a plural figure, ever prone to dispersion, as Barthes theorizes in his “Preface” to *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (9). Jane Gallop summarizes Barthes’ concept of the author’s “friendly return” in her study of literary and scholarly responses to authors’ literal deaths, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time*.<sup>21</sup> “The author as institution, the author taught by literary history, is a monument, an epic destiny; that author cannot touch us. But Barthes imagines another author, a friendly body, a mortal author, who even after he is dead, can ‘come touch some future body’” (47). Welcoming the return of the late author has great relevance for celebrating Ellison’s craftsmanship and literary labor. We are, after all, those future bodies, capable, in ecstatic fashion, of being touched by the late author’s poignant labor and the energy coursing through his fluid text. These claims are decidedly not limited to posthumously published texts. The posthumous text, however, magnifies the dynamics of deferral and citationality, as it endlessly escapes being tethered to its author’s lifespan; by way of this generative gap, it promotes an implicit deconstruction of standardizing notions of presence, progress, and closure.

The friendly return of the author, moreover, allows us to meditate upon the author’s writings and statements in playful fashion, rather than reading them as mandates or as keys to unlocking difficult or unfinished texts. Ellison’s 1977 essay “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” for instance, offers us insight into reading his final text: “So perhaps

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<sup>21</sup> Gallop’s study revisits the debates around the “death of the Author,” then focuses on the literal death of the author and the writing acts that death often inspires in the late author’s peers, awakening in each a sense of the writer’s own mortality.

we shy from confronting our cultural wholeness,” Ellison suggests, “because it offers no easily recognizable points of rest [...] Instead, the whole is always in chaotic motion” (*Collected Essays* 504). Indeed, Ellison’s chaotic novel offers the ecstatic experience of contemplating the ongoing assemblage of American social identity and culture, and the germinal role of African American identity and culture, and of Ellison’s own plural role, within that dynamic process. Such a reading practice dispels the illusion of a definitive, bound work—the offspring endorsed by its father/author—and redirects us toward this ecstatic text’s morphing forms, which coalesce only in ephemeral fashion, according to a particular subject’s reading of its many threads.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the posthumous text circulates in the world without authorization.

Though an unbound text like Ellison’s has triggered a critical reliance on its author/originator’s biography and stated intentions to contain its excess, such a move forecloses the dialectical tensions that flow through this “living text, amoebic in its fluidity” (Callahan and Bradley *Three Days* 499), blocking our ability to mine its practically unexplored temporal complexities and resonant critique of authorized American history. We cannot “own” this unbound text, in the conventional sense of the term, for much of it is housed in bursting archival folders and boxes. Its chaotic state, nevertheless, reveals the formation of a reading self that is invoked whenever one takes up a “finished” text. The fact that such a text, as we have been conditioned to expect, is not available to us, does not mean that Ellison’s unbound novel cannot be read. The

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, many readers read *Juneteenth* prior to *Three Days*, owing to its chronological publication date; nevertheless, this is largely culled from Book II of Ellison’s three-part project.

ecstatic model necessitates, in other words, a letting go of the singular work in favor of the chaotic plural text, accessible in myriad forms, but irreducible to any one of them.

### The Ecstatic Text that Will Not Cohere

In the face of a text that willfully resists form and closure, even to its own author, where do we turn for meaning-making? In the absence of both an organized manuscript and Ellison's express wishes for his novel's future circulation, biographical theories regarding why Ellison did not, or could not, finish his second novel abound, ranging from the psychoanalytic to the materialist. The implicit insistence behind such readings is that some aspect of Ellison's biography, psychology, or creative process will unlock the "true" meaning and design of his novel in progress and explain his ultimate "failure" to complete it. Eric Sundquist writes: "the loss of a substantial part of his novel-in-progress in a fire in 1967 was harmful, of course, but it does not explain the erosion of imaginative force that turned Ellison into the most highly esteemed disappointment in the history of American literature, apparently unable to match the stratospheric fictive standard set by *Invisible Man*" ("Dry Bones" 222). Sundquist's simultaneous admiration for Ellison and deep regret regarding "the enigma of his stymied career" (222) is characteristic of much scholarship on Ellison's unfinished novel. Supporters and detractors alike use the term "failure" in their critical and biographical accounts, expressing a melancholic impulse to tether the unfinished text to its author's status as a failed activist during the 1960s and



70s.<sup>23</sup> By placing a premium on completion, such laments fall prey to progressivist notions of plenitude, foreclosing the generativity of process. These widespread sentiments convey a profound, Romantic disappointment that Ellison, the lone captain, could not pilot his vessel back to port, for implicitly, such a feat would have consolidated his role as a titan of African American letters and of the American literary canon.

While a staunch advocate for Ellison's process, Bradley aims, nevertheless, to redeem Ellison from the narrative of failure by returning to authorial intention. His book-length study of Ellison's creative process considers the impact of material affordances, such as Ellison's switch to the personal computer in 1982, as key factors in Ellison's proliferating drafts. Bradley argues that psychological speculations regarding why Ellison did not finish his novel "fail to consider Ellison's own explanation of the novel's protracted composition. In Ellison's words it is possible to hear the tones not of defeat or exhaustion but, rather, of aspiration and promise—the search for a response fitting to the great challenge of his call—the aura of summing up" (*Ellison* 211). This challenge, in Bradley's view, was thwarted by the relentless passage of watershed twentieth-century historical events that continually deferred Ellison's goal to write a novel so expansive that it could "sum up" the century. Bradley's return to "Ellison's own explanation" typifies the move to find the key to the text in the man himself; for Bradley, "to read the manuscripts of Ellison's second novel is, in some ways, to read Ralph Ellison himself in progress" (9). In contrast, I maintain a return to the text that insists upon the generative

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<sup>23</sup> Callahan, Bradley, Crouch, Rampersad, Rogin, Podhoretz all use the term "failure," though with different valences—the latter two, Rogin and Podhoretz, use the term in derisive fashion, to label Ellison's aesthetic project itself, while the others deploy it in the sense of a failure to finish.

gap, rather than a correspondence, between the author and his text, while promoting his friendly return as a plural figure, prone to dispersion (Barthes 9).

Ellison's career and posthumous legacy evidence the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of the author function, as well as the unique demands placed upon the artist of color. John Guillory points out that after the "death of the Author" as Romantic genius, the author was revived to serve as the spokesperson for his social group.<sup>24</sup> This claim is particularly compelling in Ellison's case, as his liberal humanist views have been consistently couched in the language of failure for Ellison's not being radical enough during the Black Arts Movement: "Ellison is at once the most overtly political of authors and yet the most reluctant to write political dogma" (Bradley *Ellison* 94). Ellison disappointed many on the left by renouncing the Communist Party, then later by forming close ties to the Johnson White House and by supporting the Vietnam War effort. Nevertheless, Kenneth Warren observes in his book-length study of Ellison, *So Black and So Blue*, that many critiques waged by black nationalists against Ellison for his seemingly apolitical role as an artist, as compared, for example, with Amiri Baraka's radical aesthetic philosophy, were later retracted by such prominent writers and critics as Harold Cruse and Larry Neal (17).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Guillory. "Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imagination." *Transition* 56 (1991): 36-55. Print.

<sup>25</sup> In contrast, though Houston Baker praised Ellison's vernacular aesthetic in "To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode" (1983), he later critiqued *Invisible Man's* apoliticism in "A Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never *Avant-Garde*" (1999). See also Adam Bradley (*Ellison* 60).

Cruse's and Neal's critical reevaluations of Ellison's writing, among others, are the result of turning critical attention back to the text and its political investments and aesthetics, rather than to that set of ideas we invoke when we utter the author's name in order to advance a claim. Cruse insists that "the evidence remains that all of Ellison's work as exemplified in *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act* is definitely racial" (qtd. in *So Black and So Blue* 17). We must add Ellison's unbound novel to the list of texts that showcase Ellison's sustained commitment to probing the complexities of racialized experience in American life. Cruse's use of the term "evidence," though, simultaneously points to the ways in which Ellison's politics have been interrogated and lambasted through the years. Redirecting our attention away from Ellison's biography or expressed intentions, as Cruse does, and toward Ellison's work as evidence of political meaning allows us to approach his unbound novel's engagement with African American identity and history with complexity, even contradiction, in mind. Such possibilities are shut down by dogmatic chastisements of the author's perceived lack of political conviction or, for that matter, efforts to position him on the radical left earlier in his career, for however fleeting a time, as Barbara Foley aims to do in *Wrestling with the Left* her ambitious engagement with those radical passages excised during the seven-year process of Ellison's writing and the editing of *Invisible Man*.

Irving Howe's 1963 critique of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin in "Black Boys and Native Sons," published in *Dissent*, chastises the authors for having departed from the style pioneered by their "father," Richard Wright. In Ellison's rebuttal, "The World and the Jug," the author famously claimed Wright and Hughes as his literary *relatives*,

but Eliot, Malraux, Dostoevsky and Faulkner as his *ancestors*. The active formation of literary canons and the “great authors” paradigm that perpetuates such moves finds company with Harold Bloom’s masculinist formulation of the “anxiety of influence,” whereby the son must first emulate the style of, then slay his literary father in Oedipal fashion.<sup>26</sup> In terms similar to debates over Ellison’s politics, phallogentric debates around the fraught office of the black male author pivot on allegiances to other (male) author-originators—a critical conversation perpetuated by reading the posthumous text by way of the author function with its tacit reliance on a (white) male bourgeois worldview. Ellison’s formal style has been reduced to one side of a literary binary that pits his purportedly apolitical modernism in opposition to Richard Wright’s scathing social realism. In this causal schema, radical politics lead to a sociological, realist technique, while literary innovation leads to an abstract high modernism.

An exclusive allegiance to a male-centered canon or to Ellison’s own stated literary influences as the barometer of “how to read” his work, eclipses other productive pairings that turn to the text, and to networked relationships, rather than the author function, for generating meaning. For instance, in her discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks’ novella *Maud Martha* (1953), Mary Helen Washington foregrounds the text’s subtle transmission of black female rage, which was entirely lost upon its reviewers. In sharp contrast, Ellison’s contemporaneous *Invisible Man* occasioned glowing reviews and

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<sup>26</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* for a feminist critique of Bloom’s model of authorship and the anxiety of influence. “Toward a Feminist Poetics.” *The Madwoman in the Attic*. 1979. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 3-93. Print.

“serious” critical assessments from the likes of Wright Morris and, indeed, Irving Howe. This immediately situated Ellison within the picaresque tradition of the white literary establishment (Washington 464)—a move confirmed by his being awarded the prestigious National Book Award. Reading *Maud Martha* and *Invisible Man* together, to give just one example, yields meanings and cultural critiques that are elided by the “great authors” paradigm. This insular, self-perpetuating model reinforces the author function and restricts the play of the text, posthumous and otherwise.

Ellison’s paradoxical status, simultaneously figured in narratives of success and failure, has pushed many critics to obsess over Ellison’s biography and public pronouncements, even as his author function rehearses the demands placed upon the artist of color to speak for the collective. To be clear, my point is that Ellison’s work is deeply invested in the role of the imagination in addressing social injustices and in effecting social transformation. A reliance on Ellison’s authorial statements regarding the reader’s imagination, however, diverts us away from such an assessment. After sharing an early draft of the novel with Albert Murray and Anatole Broyard, Ellison stated his intentions to safeguard the reader from “incompletion of form,” so as to prevent the imposition of the “reader’s imagination” owing to “too little control from the author” (*Juneteenth* “Notes” 363). These sentiments exhibit an anxiety over mastery, gesturing toward the modernist conceit of the work of art as autonomous and as the knowable product of artistic craft. In contrast, and in heteroglossic fashion, the unbound, unsigned text invites the reader’s imaginative participation and collaboration. The emphasis on Ellison’s biography and stated intentions has diverted attention away from his writing’s radical

aesthetics. Again, to emphasize these features and to take poststructuralist meditations on authorship seriously is not to erase the author as an artist, nor to discredit his labor, but rather to release the text from the trappings of authorial intention and the ways in which the “author’s life” has been appropriated to defend against ambiguity. Let us instead embrace the ecstatic play of meaning that is endlessly reanimated by the posthumous text’s “enigmatic *excess*,” (Foucault 105), which challenges us to dwell in uncertainty and ambiguity, which, in turn, disturbs entrenched attitudes regarding the proper subject and ownership.

Access to this text is the result of the editor working for years with Ellison’s writings. As Ellison’s literary executor and editor, Callahan assumed a controversial and nearly untenable role, but his role underscores the necessarily collaborative labor of posthumous publication. He explains that to shape *Juneteenth* (1999), he culled the 1972 typescript draft of “Book II” pairing it with a section previously published in magazine form, along with a lengthy section Ellison entitled “Bliss’ Birth.” In an article fittingly entitled “The Making of *Juneteenth*,” Callahan refers to “the peculiar, attenuated nature of collaboration necessarily involved in a posthumous work brought into existence by an editor in the author’s absence” (177). Callahan’s discrediting of his own “attenuated” collaborative labor suggests an allegiance to the author/originator and his presumed intentions; the impossible desire for the stabilizing authorial figure is literalized by the late author’s absence and the absence of his express wishes for the text. Tellingly, Callahan describes feeling “uneasily procrustean” about the mammoth undertaking of editing Ellison’s novel, for “here and there limbs of the manuscript would need to be

stretched, and elsewhere a protruding foot lopped off, if—a huge, improbable if—all the episodes were to be edited into a single, coherent work” (“Making” 180; original emphasis). Callahan’s invocation of the Procrustean myth to characterize his role figures the manuscript as an excessive body that must undergo elongation and amputation at the hands of the executor in order to fit the conventions of the novel’s iron frame: that is, it must comport itself as “a single, coherent work,” an organic whole. This setting of the unwieldy manuscript on the rack restages the decades-long interrogation of Ellison’s politics, as well as the expectations for what a black modernist novel should be able to do. Callahan’s comments maintain that coherence is the benchmark of the novel, from which we can infer that the critic and, perhaps, the reader, too, has taken up the mantle of Procrustes by exercising the author function and discussing the manuscript primarily as a failure given its excessive formlessness.

The imbricatedness of the author function with notions of linear progression and resolution are heard in Callahan’s emphasis on the primacy of chronology to his approach: “Clearly the editorial task was to sort the materials into a chronology of composition and, if possible, a coherent narrative sequence” (“Making” 180). What *Juneteenth* offers us, then, is a tenuous gesture toward narrative “coherence,” posthumously constructed from the unbound novel’s ecstatic dispersion. The term coherence, however, is at odds with Book II’s unruly narrative content, which dwells in the space of memory, in the manner of a stream of consciousness. Both *Juneteenth* and *Three Days* demonstrate an active selection of textual material that highlights the vulnerable, malleable status of the posthumous text once it has left its author’s hands and

entered new authorial contexts. The three-part project, which again varies in narrative point of view from McIntyre's first-person hardboiled delivery in Book I, to an antiphonal, *avant-garde* style in Book II, to a third-person free indirect discourse that often transpires in the mind of Reverend Hickman in Book III, works against coherence, operating instead in a polyphonic mode.

Nevertheless, in spite of Callahan's express goal to produce a "coherent" work out of Ellison's proliferating drafts and revisions, and so to sign Ellison's name to his posthumous novel, many of Callahan's published remarks are frank, melancholic assurances that the reader will not find closure in the text published as *Juneteenth*. The belated appearance of *Three Days*, published ten years after *Juneteenth*, and sixteen years after Ellison's death, further amplifies the defensive, redemptive nature of these posthumous publications. "In the end," Callahan asserts, "it was impossible not to conclude that Ellison—who had boldly aimed at an epic novel charting the immense, and uneasily settled, moral and racial territory of America—did not manage to thread his way out of his self-designed labyrinth" ("Making" 184). Rather than viewing Ellison's being lost in the labyrinth as a failure, this chapter considers the generative potential of the unbound novel's myriad forms. This is akin to Borges' challenge in "The Garden of Forking Paths" to imagine the metaphorical play afforded by the chaotic novel with its temporal labyrinth of innumerable pathways. The chaotic novel revolutionizes static form in favor of immeasurable combinations. At the material level, such a model recalls Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, a massive, incomplete, three-part tome, which was released posthumously in German in book form as a "remix," containing



drafts and notes, and twenty compact discs, enabling readers to engage its many strands and appreciate its polyphonic aims. Ironically, inasmuch as Ellison revered form, his ecstatic unbound text allows for a radically democratic reading experience that is in keeping, nevertheless, with Ellison's allegiance to a critical humanism.

“The End is in the Beginning and Lies Far Ahead”: Subverting Historical Time<sup>27</sup>

Our material belongings continue to circulate in the wake of our demise—here, in the form of the posthumous text. These remains commingle with post-WWII American narratives of national belonging. That the latter has been aligned with narratives of “great men,” the “history of the victors” (Benjamin “Thesis VII”), bears a direct relationship to heroic individualism and acquisition of property. Ellison's restless novel actively wrestles with such thematics at the narrative level, even as it engages the pluralist vision emblazoned on the National Seal, *e pluribus unum* (*Juneteenth* 21), “out of many, one” as an elusive, if not impossible goal.<sup>28</sup> Such diegetic concerns are mirrored at the meta-textual level by the novel's unbound, unsigned status, and its incomplete posthumous editions. Ellison's novel offers a conduit for thinking through subversive, improvisational possibilities for enacting one's place in America: always within the context of the nation-state, but in a refashioned, defiant state of excess. Such excess calls into question the nation-state's very formation, revealing its patriarchal and bourgeois logic. Ellison's public politics seemingly reject the alternative formation of black nationalism, while

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<sup>27</sup> Ellison *Invisible Man* 6

<sup>28</sup> See Moten for a reading of a related concept in *Invisible Man* (*In the Break* 69; 73).

problematically cathecting with the nation-state by way of his liberal humanism.

Paramount to that vision for Ellison, however, is the inextricability of black life to America's cultural identity—a philosophy with transformative potentialities that are elided by a trenchant reliance on the author function.<sup>29</sup>

Ellison's unbound novel performs a non-linear, underground subversion of recorded American history with its articulations of the dense workings of human *temporality* as being always already in tension with the rigors of historical, clock *time*. “*For between the mechanical ticks and tocks of what we choose to call ‘time’*” Reverend Hickman ruminates, “*all notions of ‘was,’ ‘here,’ ‘now,’ and ‘shall-be’ get mixed in the mind...*” (*Three Days* 570; original italics). In turn, Ellison's ecstatic text flouts the exclusionary nature of scripted historical events with its flaunting of temporal excess. The latter destabilizes standardized discourses that implicitly discipline and erase bodies in the name of “*that tricky notion called ‘progress’*” (*Three Days* 570; original italics).

The polyphonic narrative orbits around the text's inquiry into paternity and into race being, as Callahan notes, “at the heart of the riddle of American identity” (DeSantis “Cord of Kinship” 616). Indeed, the heart of the novel, Book II, from which *Juneteenth* was culled, delves deeply into this riddle and its complex disavowal in the national imaginary. Though Bliss/Sunraider's mother is white, his father's identity remains unknown, but he is assumed to be black; the black man whom Bliss' mother falsely names is lynched. On the verge of giving birth, Bliss' mother comes to the home of the lynching victim's brother, “Big Lon” Hickman, a jazzman, requesting, much to his

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<sup>29</sup> See Ellison's essays in “The Seer and the Seen” (*Collected Essays* 63-188).

outrage and incredulity, that *he* deliver her child. Hickman holds a gun to her belly, torn between his impulse to kill her and avenge his innocent brother's death, and the ethical imperative to deliver her baby. It is at this crossroads that Alonzo Hickman is reborn as Reverend "Daddy" Hickman. Hickman delivers and names the boy, Bliss, and raises him in his community after Bliss' mother leaves the newborn child in his care. In time, Hickman grooms Bliss to play an integral role as a boy preacher in Hickman's revivalist church service, where his congregants revere him. Ultimately Bliss runs away from his affiliative kin, traveling the Southern countryside as an ostensibly white filmmaker who capitalizes upon the dreams of small town residents, before moving North, where he fully accedes to white power, becoming Adam Sunraider, a reactionary US Senator. As it circles this primal scene of the fundamental unknowability of Bliss' paternity, the novel ponders the unanswerable questions engendered by the image of the bastard son. By way of its thematic patterning of father/son relationships, the three sections of Ellison's unbound novel and its many archival threads generate a discontinuous, temporally thick discourse about matters of race, gender, legitimacy, and national belonging.

There is an intricate diegetic web spun around fathers and sons that adheres, however tenuously, outside the norms of abstract, white male citizenship and national belonging in the novel. Ellison's ambitious critique of authorized history resonates with Hortense Spillers' analysis of the patriarchal logic of legitimacy in her germinal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), in which she rebuts the pathologizing of matriarchy and African American family life in what came to be known as "the Moynihan Report" (1965). Spillers delivers a feminist mapping and

critique of the “theft of the body” (67) and the “ungender[ing]” of flesh (68) that transpired in the Middle Passage, whereby enslaved African women and men, and girls and boys, were quantified in the process of objectification, and differentiated only in terms of the space they required as cargo in the hold. This process of ungendering structured the white domination over and circumvention of family life for African descended peoples, where babies were born into the condition of the mother, who were “both mother and mother-dispossessed” (Spillers 80). Of her essay’s many implications, I focus on the essay’s opening claims regarding legitimacy vis-à-vis the literary trope of the “notorious bastard” (son) (65). She notes that from Caliban to Joe Christmas, the bastard son is a decidedly male concern, raising issues of legitimacy and inheritance in a way that does not have a female counterpoint. This insight speaks to the patriarchal subtext of the author function and its treatment of the text as progeny; the posthumous text takes on the status of bastard, throwing the logic of literary inheritance and ownership into question.

The undecideability of Bliss/Sunraider’ father’s background—he is unnamed and so assumed to be black—unleashes the unsettling force of what Spillers terms the “papa’s maybe” in this unbound novel. The attendant in-betweenness of Bliss’ subject position as a bastard son is haunted by the specter of Hickman’s brother who is falsely named and lynched as the boy’s father. This generates an excess that bars Bliss, both through rhetorical violence and the omnipresent threat of physical injury, from national belonging and the historical time it endorses. The novel, in turn, figures the “*nation [as] a larger, more intricate form of the family [...] taunted by second sons, even Smerdyakovs full of*

*dark passions*” (*Three Days* 74; original italics). Bliss is emblematic of these second sons who taunt the nation-state’s coherence and legitimacy. The self-reflexive role-playing that Bliss takes part in when he runs away from Hickman’s church underscores his desire to leave behind the abject positionality of the black bastard son. Bliss moves through the American landscape, transforming himself into a white filmmaker, “Mr. Movie Man.” This performance is occasionally interrupted by his collecting coin as a charismatic itinerant black preacher. Finally, he assumes his long-standing masquerade as the white Senator Adam Sunraider, whose racially-charged rants on the Senate floor ironically draw upon his experiences as a preacher and a filmmaker for their theatricality. Adding further complexity to this thematic at the narrative level is the impossible desire on the part of critics to forge a bond between Ellison, the author/originator, and the unfinished novel, his progeny/text: a wish, however, that is continually displaced by the restless forms of the ecstatic text and its posthumous afterlives. In this way, the novel anticipates and plays out the thematics of patrimony structuring its critical reception.

Bliss/Sunraider’s roles rehearse the paradoxes and exclusionary practices inherent in the production of American identity: to be someone is to not be someone else.

Bliss/Sunraider’s tale follows a road that unfolds, not as a linear, progressive trajectory, but rather, as Faulkner’s Joe Christmas realizes near the end of his death-bound journey, as a *circle*, which, in Sunraider’s case, leads him back to his affiliative black kin, who meet him in Washington D.C., the center of American power. Reverend Hickman, responding to rumors that Sunraider’s life is in danger, travels with his congregants to the Capitol to warn the Senator, his wayward son, of the threat. Though Hickman and his

church dream of redemption for and reconciliation with Bliss/Sunraider, the novel's sustained critique of historical time troubles any clear resolution, much as its unbound pages refuse a stable form that complicate the status of its multiple posthumous publications.

"The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" (6), muses the protagonist of *Invisible Man*. The operation of this statement of ecstatic temporality courses through Ellison's unbound novel, whose "circa 1955" setting foregrounds the Civil Rights Movement as a dense temporal node in American history, when those considered "outside of historical time" (*Invisible Man* 440) rejected the logic of gradualism and entered the march of history with demands for equal recognition and treatment under the law. Without making explicit references to such landmark events as the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the murder of young Emmett Till in Mississippi in the late summer of 1955, or the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott, the novel, both at the formal and thematic level, gives voice to "the fluid flux that underlies the patterned processes which those above term history," invoked in this chapter's epigraph. In doing so, Ellison's unbound novel exposes and critiques the effects of a repressive model of History, wherein a teleological momentum privileges the master narrative of the elite and powerful, thereby normalizing and rendering historical events as apparently inevitable.

Ellison's novel, perhaps especially in the material culled from Book II as *Juneteenth*, advances and extends the modernist literary project by setting the temporality of embodied, racialized subjectivity in an overdetermined relationship with the historical *timeframe* of the black freedom struggle. Its myriad plotlines perform an ambitious

temporal reckoning with slavery's traumatic past, the effects of the failure of radical Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, and the dramatic migratory flows of black subjects from rural terrain into urban centers in the early twentieth-century. These temporally excessive layers press upon the homogenizing narrative of the abstract historical past that suffuses the novel's 1955 present, which is aptly inaugurated on the US Senate floor, even as they invoke the possibilities of the futural—the promise of greater access and resources for the marginalized. Reading the posthumous publications from 1999 and 2010 demonstrates a temporal complexity that revisits these mid-century hopes, while registering their as-yet unrealized status today.

Ellison's novelistic vision stems from the critique that W.E.B. DuBois wages against the traditional practice of American history in "The Propaganda of History," the final chapter of his opus *Black Reconstruction* (1935). DuBois exposes the hegemonic discourse's silencing of the rhizomatic histories of the freedom struggle that transpired throughout the institution of slavery and during the chaotic aftermath of its dissolution:

In this sweeping mechanistic interpretation, there is no room for the real plot of the story, for the clear mistake and guilt of rebuilding a new slavery of the working class in the midst of a fateful experiment in democracy; for the triumph of sheer moral courage and sacrifice in the abolition crusade; and for the hurt and struggle of degraded black millions in their fight for freedom and their attempt to enter democracy. (715)

Importantly, DuBois figures history in narrative terms, insisting upon a space wherein the "real plot" might find and sound its many voices. His comments call attention to the

attempts of millions of black subjects to “enter democracy,” and the ways in which that process is wrapped up with and inextricable from class struggle. His insights likewise forecast later attempts to “enter” linear time during the Civil Rights Movement, as made palpable with Dr. Martin Luther King’s March on Washington in August of 1963.

Democracy, as distinct from capitalism, might allow for alternative modes of struggle and becoming that would abolish the “new slavery of the working class.” In many ways, Ellison’s unbound novel takes up the call of narrativizing this complex American saga with its interest in micro, underground histories as transpiring always alongside and in excess of dominant historical narratives.

Though the Civil Rights Movement has been monumentalized as a huge step forward in the “democratic experiment,” it bristles with micro-histories that refuse the plotting of successive events leading to an abiding equality for all.<sup>30</sup> In turn, when Hickman’s congregants visit the Washington Mall, they playfully juxtapose their own family stories with their impressions of the national monuments that loom in every direction. Their energy reminds Hickman of the congregants’ excitement regarding their favorite holiday, Juneteenth (*Three Days* 571), celebrating Emancipation, the news and reality of which arrived belatedly to enslaved men and women in Texas on June 19, 1865—two months after the end of the Civil War. In this way, the notion of belatedness is woven into the posthumous novel *Juneteenth*’s very title, selected by Callahan; the posthumous novel operates in a synecdochic relationship to the unbound novel at large.

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<sup>30</sup> To name just one example, Bayard Rustin was an openly gay civil rights activist who played a prominent, though historically under-recognized role in the movement. See *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*. Dir. Nancy D. Kates and Bennett Singer. PBS, 2003. Film.



In *Three Days*, Hickman's musings on national belonging by way of the monuments' metonymies lead him to conclude, "*So while our role in much that happened has been denied or distorted in print, the living connections still exist. The truth lives on, if only in the minds and hearts of the ignored and forgotten*" (*Three Days* 572; original italics). The novel brings this embodied, underground history to the surface, not to assume a center or posit an origin, but to subvert and refashion the certitude of the historical record. This shared or communal "truth" is an affective bond carried forward in the flesh, "the minds and hearts of the ignored and forgotten."

Ellison's novel, perhaps especially in the material culled from Book II as *Juneteenth*, advances and extends experimental modernism's interest in temporalities and epistemologies by commingling the temporal excess of embodied subjectivity with the historical setting of the Civil Rights Movement. As Spillers reminds us, "Between Dreiser and Ellison a radically new literary reality asserts itself, basically combative toward the past" ("Ellison's Usable Past" 65). Ellison presents Sunraider/Bliss' and Hickman's individual, though interlaced temporalities by way of a mystical, antiphonal delivery in the liminal space of the hospital. Such dialogical, recursive dynamics resist the illusion of a single, forward-moving narrative progression. Although the novel might gesture toward psychic integration and, moreover, redemption, its unsettled content and undecidable form productively suspend the illusion of closure in favor of the "fluid flux" of embodied histories. The temporal density of the racialized past suffuses the mid-century present, even as the unknown future extends toward a beckoning horizon. Ellison's unbound novel delivers a performance of temporal simultaneity: it brings the

past institution of slavery into the legacy of racism in its 1955 narrative present; it dwells in the subjective, inner time of memory—an interior space deeply imbricated with the demands of social identity; and it signals the cyclical modes of birth and death. These temporal modes commingle while continually being pulled toward an American futurity that remains to be seen, following the purported assimilation of disavowed subjects into historical time.

The novel, in spite of its being drafted into the early 1990s, remains largely a modernist text, as even in Book II's most experimental temporal modes, there is still a shared reality around which all of its characters and events cluster and which is a springboard for ecstatic departures into the past. By way of a vernacular technique, Ellison weaves the historical past into the communal fabric of unauthorized African American oral histories. Appropriately, Hickman queries: "In this entire country *what* is time? When mountains and rivers, people and events have been arbitrarily renowned or deliberately forgotten?" (Ralph Ellison Papers II:55/4). As the text's temporal excess flows through its vernacular, folkloric, and sermonic registers, it rejects high modernism's posturing of impersonality, even as it reenergizes its experimental promise. When Sunraider/Bliss is shot on the Senate floor—the core event of the entire unbound novel—he retreats into the recesses of his memory wherein he is both participant in and outsider to a black communal experience unrecorded in the annals of American history. This allows for a fluid narrative perspective that critiques the twinned models of temporal succession and teleological history, even as it unpacks their underlying assumptions and social constructedness.

*Juneteenth* and Book II open with Sunraider delivering a speech upon the Senate floor that is couched in the rationalist rhetoric of progress—a message that is disrupted and disputed by the subsequent attempt against his life. Adding another polyphonic layer to his novel, the Senator’s extended speech is rife with euphemistic references to the past. By way of antithesis, it invokes historical time’s amnesiac demands and its complicity with upholding Jim Crow. Sunraider calls upon the nation to “forget the past by freeing ourselves so that we can reassemble its untidy remnants in the interest of a more human order” (*Juneteenth* 18). This appeal obscures the institutional practice of slavery, even as the “order” to which Sunraider appeals echoes the overtly racist segregationist rhetoric of Southern politicians like Bull Connor and George Wallace.<sup>31</sup> The “untidy remnants” of Sunraider’s own disavowed past soon return when his illegitimate son, Severen, rises from the Visitor’s Gallery and shoots him several times. Sunraider’s own ambiguous paternity recurs in the form of his unacknowledged son, the child of his affair with Lavatrice, a mixed-race woman of black and Native American heritage, when he was capitalizing upon the hopes of small town peoples in his role as Mr. Movie Man.

The unbound novel reveals that Lavatrice takes her own life when Sunraider leaves her, and Severen, decades later, attempts to slay his father in retribution. Lavatrice has been entirely erased from Sunraider’s public persona, and Severen is taken as a child from his black community by Sunraider’s lawyer and raised as a white man in an elite boarding school. Severen longs to reconnect with the figures from his childhood past; he vows to kill his white father to avenge his betrayed mother and kin. These dynamics drive

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<sup>31</sup> For a reading of the manuscript’s political complexities see Szalay, Michael. “Ralph Ellison’s Unfinished Second Skin.” *American Literary History* 23.4 (2011): 795-827.

the narrative's interest in Severen's irreconcilable search for resolution, and the impossibility of pure origins, which is mirrored in the ever-thwarted redemptive impulses aligned with the novel's posthumous publications. The simultaneous return of Severen and Sunraider's shared bastard status ushers the force of the "papa's maybe" into the national center of power; it likewise induces an inner welling up of temporality that operates as a narrative journey into the unconscious wherein long repressed memories, indicative of both personal and political forces, surge back to the surface.

Though Reverend Hickman and his congregants do their best to warn Sunraider of the threat against him, they are seen in the Capitol only in terms of their incongruity with the Senator's race-baiting political record. They are barred from seeing the Senator by security and his secretary—who is pretty certain the Senator does not know any "negroes" apart from "the boy who shines shoes at his golf club" (*Juneteenth* 6)—but are present in the Visitor's Gallery when Sunraider is shot while delivering a speech on the Senate floor below. The would-be assassin, Severen—who is featured, ecstatically, in Book I as a subversive in the French underground resistance during World War II, and in Book III as a young man searching for answers about his heritage—wounds his father multiple times and subsequently leaps from the Visitor's Gallery to his death before Hickman can stop him. The text unfurls itself in a temporally dense dimension, as the past, both personal and monumental, saturates the present, even as it projects itself forward toward an uncertain future. The novel's discursive moves belie the progressive narrative of freedom enacted in the theatre of the Senate Chamber, privileging instead the embodied stories of those "deliberately forgotten" in American history.

The novel's temporal pressure intensifies as historical time collides with the excess of embodiment that is irreducible and which it cannot manage in its narrative; in turn, when Sunraider is shot and his bombastic speech on the Senate floor gives way to an *involuntary* proclamation of his signature line from his childhood role in Hickman's sermon. Sunraider hears himself cry out, "'Lord, LAWD,' he heard, 'WHY HAST THOU...,' smelling the hot presence of blood as the question took off with the hysterical timbre of a Negro preacher who in his disciplined fervor sounded somehow like an accomplished actor shouting his lines. '*Forsaken ... forsaken ... forsaken*'" (*Juneteenth* 26; original emphases). Rising, in antiphony, from the Visitors' Gallery, Hickman answers the Senator's call, "hoarsely singing" (*Juneteenth* 27), ushering the racialized past into the present, and the uncanny voice of the marginalized and the silenced into the Senate chamber, the now disrupted center of the nation-state's seeming power and order.

### Resurrecting the Late Author

Significantly, we witness the Senator's physical and psychic transformation as he is torn violently from abstract time and space to embodiment as a wounded body. His involuntary cry performs the unconscious return to his childhood vocation as a boy preacher in the black church. The novel does not figure this as a return to essence, but rather the return of a different performance of self, long suppressed, but always present—the force of black life in mainstream American culture. Here, the novel contrasts Sunraider's black childhood community with the conservative, white supremacist

position he has long occupied. In turn, the “self” that is undone is the rational Cartesian citizen, here, stripped naked and betrayed by his “Negro” voice and the “hot presence of blood.” This underscores a renewal of the unanswerable question of his heritage and of miscegenation’s broader disavowal in the national imaginary. The breakdown of the black/white binary is worked out on and in Sunraider’s body during his hallucinatory vision of the Senate’s Great Seal coming unmoored as its eagle screeches forth and the inscription *e pluribus unum* is defamiliarized in this “strange temporality” (Holland 37). This marks the return of his affiliative African American kin in the Visitor’s Gallery—the choreography of which restages Bliss’ childhood visit to the silent picture show with Reverend Hickman, where they sat together in the balcony of the “colored section.” This is significantly where Bliss experiences a moment of *méconnaissance*, whereby he believes the white actress on screen is his mother. He cathects with this fantasy and runs away shortly thereafter, desirous to be on the other side of the camera eye as the looker, rather than the to-be-looked-at.<sup>32</sup> Under the weight of Sunraider’s affiliative black kin’s implicit demands for recognition in the Senate Chamber, his performance of abstract selfhood crumbles; much of what ensues in Book II may be read as a staging of Sunraider/Bliss’ recognition of his black daddy, Hickman, metaphorizing the nation-state’s forced reckoning with those subjects long deemed in excess of and barred from equal rights and abstract citizenship.

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<sup>32</sup> In her discussion of the black female spectator, bell hooks adds complexity to and disrupts the spectatorial binary of male/female by factoring race into considerations of the power differentials of looking, when the very act of looking has been cause for brutality and state-sanctioned violence against black men and women (“The Oppositional Gaze” 290-91).

As Sunraider lies wounded in the liminal space of the hospital, poised between life and death, long repressed memories return. Reverend Hickman is at his side, per the Senator's request, reminding him of times long past when the two traveled together as preachers. In this setting, Sunraider's childhood self, Bliss, returns to his consciousness, as Hickman speaks to him, calling him forth; Bliss performed a climactic role in Hickman's church service, which culminated in his emerging on cue from a small white coffin, wearing a white suit, bible in hand. Embedded deep within Sunraider's unconscious, the boy Bliss returns to Sunraider's mind and in the men's sporadic talk as he comes in and out of consciousness. In the following passage, Bliss is enclosed in his coffin, nervously awaiting his signal from Hickman; the scene significantly transpires during a Juneteenth celebration. Bliss describes a temporal suspension, as "float[s] in blackness" (*Juneteenth* 142):

It was not yet time. I could hear the waves of Daddy Hickman's voice rolling against the sides, then down and back, now to boom suddenly in my ears as I felt the weight of darkness leave my eyes, my face bursting with sweat [...] For always it was as though it waited for the moment when I was prepared to answer Daddy Hickman's signal to rise up that it seemed to slide like heavy mud from my face to my thighs and there to hold me like quicksand. Always at the sound of Daddy Hickman's voice I came floating up like a corpse shaken loose from the bed of a river and the terror rising with me. (*Juneteenth* 145-146)

The markers of a birth scene abound in the extended passage: "the pink insulation of the

[coffin's] padding" (*Juneteenth* 142), the rending of the coffin door, the bright lights and sounds, the abject body covered in sludge, and its labored, reluctant entry into the world. As he awaits his cue in the coffin, Bliss, like the baby in utero, is enveloped by Hickman's voice and its reverberations in the fervent call and response flowing between Hickman and the joyous congregation; this ecstatic, Dionysian force gives birth to Bliss time and again in what Sunraider refers to as "their absurd and eternal play" (*Juneteenth* 143) of the black boy's resurrection. With his dramatic emergence from the coffin, the jubilant congregants are likewise reborn, layering the motif of rebirth and redemptive time into the novel's polyphonic narrative strands. Nevertheless, Bliss experiences psychological and physical terror each time he reaffirms his black body in the coffin, implicitly registering the rhetorical and bodily violence exerted on black subjects, directly linking them to the practice of slavery and the racialized past.

Accordingly, time is idiosyncratic and excessive in this passage: the boy is at once a baby and a dead man, a Christ-figure and a huckster who wanted only to be paid with ice cream cones (*Juneteenth* 110-11). The cyclical rhythms of Hickman's revivalist service are in simultaneous conversation with the redemptive time of salvation and its complicity with providential history. Again, the unbound novel resists an insertion in linear time with the trope of resurrection, which operates by way of literal, then psychic repetition. Repetition, in turn, is that which recurs with a difference. In synaesthetic fashion, the recurrent "it" in this passage that "slide[s] like heavy mud from [Bliss'] face to [his] thighs and there to hold [him] like quicksand," is figured as *blackness*—a mode of being that engulfs Bliss, overwhelming him. He is a corpse dredged by Hickman's



voice from the depths of the river bed: an uncanny sensation that provokes “terror” in him as his young body rejects the untimely space of the coffin as he “undergoes countless deaths and resurrections” (*Juneteenth* 110). Moreover, Bliss comes into, or rather is *held in* his body as a black boy, resurrected ritualistically by the force of Hickman and the congregants, who hail him with their collective look and call of faith and reverence. Bliss’ resistance, however, to “those perpetual descents into blackness,” ultimately leads to his running away from a precarious life that is subject to white terror at all times, toward the privilege afforded by white masculinity.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, he achieves this power by capitalizing on his training as a preacher in the black church and masquerading this performance in the guise of political (white) power.

This integral passage from *Juneteenth* (and Book II) rehearses many of the temporal, aesthetic, and ethical complexities raised by Ellison’s literally and metaphorically excessive novel and its posthumous afterlives. On a meta-textual level, Bliss’ ritualized resurrections enact the very critical impulse with which this chapter takes issue: that is, the effort to revivify the late author by way of posthumous publication, and so to fix him, once and for all, in the narrative of redemptive history. Here, we might train a critical eye on Bliss’ coffin and find all of the redemptive hopes for Ellison’s novel laid upon his author function therein. The congregants’ need to will Bliss forward amid Hickman’s cry, “Everybody’s got to die [...] That is why each and every one must be redeemed” (*Juneteenth* 143), resonates with the critical impulse to redeem Ellison from the narrative of failure by way of posthumous publication. In this way, Ellison, the

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<sup>33</sup> Ralph Ellison Papers I:115/9

author-originator, by way of his posthumous work, is resurrected at the hands of the editor/executor and the critic, and inserted, whether intentionally or not, in the mode of redemptive time as a means to recuperate Ellison's "failed" text. Significantly, Book II's hospital bedside setting, at the meta-level, recalls Callahan's feeling like Procrustes, setting Ellison's novel on the rack. The novel's obsession with fathers and sons and so with the conservative limits of legitimacy and national belonging mirrors the enduring and delimiting patriarchal paradigm of the author-originator and his progeny-text in critical discourse.

Ellison's novel's thematic investment in these matters demonstrates Sharon Holland's resonant claim that "talk of race is always already laced with a strange temporality" (37). This strangeness works at the narrative level as awareness of one's "place" in the world, which is produced relentlessly by the objectifying gaze of the Other. The novel, and Book II, in particular, foregrounds the psychic process of splitting, as Sunraider accedes to abstract citizenship as a white politician by erasing his "black" childhood and legislating against those deemed as excessive others. As it troubles the measured progression of historical time, the novel stages the ecstatic complexity of temporality and dynamic being. In a reverie imparted during his comatose condition, Sunraider/Bliss (re)encounters his childhood, both its pleasures and his fears, conjuring the memory of a wild white woman in a purple dress who burst in upon Hickman's church service and snatched young Bliss from the coffin, claiming to be his mother and calling him by the name of Cudworth. This defining incident likewise occurs during the aforementioned Juneteenth celebration. The following passage instantiates

Sunraider/Bliss' repeated constitution of self, which must be relentlessly policed and performed. The white woman's outburst disrupts Bliss' cyclical, ritualistic black birth: she knocks his coffin over, even as several black women tussle with her, eventually wresting Bliss from her arms.

Sunraider/Bliss reflects upon this moment and how it led to his running away and eventually becoming an itinerant filmmaker, Mr. Movie Man, before reinventing himself as Adam Sunraider, the white New England senator:

*So I told myself that I shall think sometime about time. It was all a matter of time; just a little time. I shall think too of the camera and the swath it cut through the country of my travels, and how after the agony I had merely stepped into a different dimension of time. Between the frames in blackness I left and in time discovered early that it was no mere matter of place which made the difference but time. And not chronology either, only time. Because I was no older and although I discovered early that in different places I became a different me. What did it all mean? Was time only space? How did she who called Cud forth become shadow and then turn flesh? She broke the structure of ritual and the world erupted. A blast of time flooded in upon me, knocking me out of the coffin into a different time. (Juneteenth 266-67; original italics)*

The passage foregrounds the tension between time and temporality and the novel's active inquiry into the workings of abstract time upon the particularized formation of identity, according to the subject's material, racial and sexual aspects. The novel suggests that, for

the embodied subject, one's relationship to historical time is inherently vexed, generating a temporal excess that the novel flaunts as an oppositional virtue. Sunraider/Bliss accesses a profound inner temporality from his liminal position in the hospital as he hovers near death, recalling and immersing himself in the temporally excessive space of the coffin of his childhood sermons. His resurrection following the shooting on the Senate floor, however, remains unknown, but unlikely.

This is a reckoning with historical time and its demands, and its revelatory effects lead to a near shattering of self. Arguably, the "different time" Bliss enters when he is knocked out of the coffin and is taken into the white woman's arms is the time of the victors, or Father's time, as this move drives a wedge between Bliss and the black community who had raised him as their own. The name Cudworth subtly reinforces the temporal notions of regurgitation and repetition, even as it underscores the text's obsession with being called forth, "*she who called Cud forth*" (267), into an embodied subject position. As a black bastard son, Bliss is expelled from the privileges of historical time, but later he rewrites his identity to afford himself an entrance into monumental history as a white senator. Philosopher of time David Wood reminds us that Chronos, the god of time, "devours his sons, those who will continue the line, the name legitimately—and yet they are returned (regurgitated). The father, here, is the principle of generation, legitimacy, conformity" (*Time After Time* 55). The novel's formulation of historical time's uneasy relationship to temporal recursivity and repetition is figured by Sunraider/Bliss' allegiance to Father's time, the time of white supremacy and the nation, which is in tension with his involuntary return and embrace of his black father, Hickman; it also

resonates with a consideration of the posthumous text, which is resurrected in time in the name of its father/originator's posterity and so in a redemptive mode. The novel's recursivity, in contrast, ushers us away from a fixed author-origin toward the ecstatic, collaborative mode of *bricolage*.

Significantly, then, *Juneteenth*'s and Book II's ending(s) revisit and reimagine the trope of the bastard son, freeing him from the patriarchal binds of inheritance and legitimacy, and flaunting his excessive status. The reader follows the Senator's descent into a personal hell composed of a series of uncanny images that culminate with the appearance of a black low-rider carrying three black men, two of who speak in a West Indian dialect. Their "junkyard sculpture" (*Juneteenth* 348), described in the language of improvisation and assemblage, swoops by, encircling the Senator, who marvels:

*They have constructed it themselves! [...] No single major part goes with the rest, yet even in their violation of the rigidities of mechanical tolerances and in their defiance of the laws of physics, property rights, patents—everything—they've forced part after part to mesh and made it run! It's a mammy-made, junkyard construction and yet those clowns have made it work, it runs! (Juneteenth 348; original italics).*

The extended passage affirms the excessive practice of self-fashioning, flouting bourgeois notions of ownership and stability, of realism and traditional form. Though the Senator others this "bastard creation of black bastards" as "mammy-made" and its *bricoleurs* as "clowns," he expresses an involuntary admiration for what they have

achieved.<sup>34</sup> Recognizing him as the race-baiting politician from television, the three men emerge from their ride, and one cries, “*Then, mahn, I say, KICK HIM ASS!*” even as Hickman’s “consoling voice” is heard “calling somewhere from above” (*Juneteenth* 348; original italics). This overdetermined ending celebrates the embodied subject who parades his excess and calls to account the workings of institutional power and white supremacy, as represented by the Senator’s inflammatory rhetoric and wielding of legislative power. Sunraider, nevertheless, can still hear Hickman’s voice, returning us, in ecstatic fashion, once more to Bliss’ coffin, wherein he is both always and never a black boy; Sunraider/Bliss remains, as such, both within and without, an insider and outsider, mobilizing Ellison’s career-long insistence upon a pluralist view of the inextricability of black culture in mainstream American life.

Ironically, Sunraider’s loathsome political rhetoric stings these young black men into action—like LeeWillie Minifees who boldly flambées his beloved Cadillac on Sunraider’s lawn in Book I in protest over the Senator lobbying to rename the Cadillac, “the Coon Cage 8” (*Three Days* 210). “The defiance, the mockery, the aggressive and insidious self-sacrificial ambiguity” (210) of Minifees’ bold, metonymic gesture is reiterated anew with these men’s self-fashioning of a new vehicle of expression, produced from an eccentric subject position that refuses the bourgeois logic of ownership. In turn, in his notes on the novel, Ellison posits “the senator’s idea: That

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<sup>34</sup> In “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida cites Levi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage*: “the necessity of borrowing one’s concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*” (360). This notion rejects the presence of an engineer or originator, in favor of the necessary practice of *bricolage*, which relentlessly combines and reconstitutes pre-existing cultural materials in novel fashion.

being an insider-outsider he would use his power to outrage Negroes into political maturity” (II:65/5). This provocative notion comes full circle, as the Senator is hailed on the Senate floor as a political insider by his own black son, Severen, and as an outsider at heart by his black father, Hickman. Similarly, in the hospital, Sunraider is paradoxically a white Senator *and* a black boy preacher. In ecstatic fashion, these fathers and sons must reckon with the “papa’s maybe” and its prohibitions for claiming one’s place in the nation-state. Though neither Severen, nor ostensibly Sunraider live through this reckoning, the text opens a space that rejects this lack as constitutive. By way of Bliss/Sunraider’s experience origins are dispelled and displaced as fundamentally unknowable. At the meta-level, Ellison’s enigmatic relationship to his unbound novel and its afterlives remains undecidable. His ecstatic novel performs a renegade literary practice in keeping with and breathing new possibilities into Houston Baker’s theorization of the Harlem Renaissance writers’ *deformation* of mastery.

Where the author and editor seek closure, the chaotic novel, with its temporally restive modes, tends toward dissemination— kaleidoscopic qualities that deserve our contemplation. What untold possibilities for engagement, interpretation, and play might emerge from a digitization of Ellison’s papers? When we cast off our biographically-oriented obsessions and the illusion of a definitive work, the unsigned, posthumous text presents us with boundless possibilities for meaning-making and play. To read Ellison’s archive in ecstatic rapport with both *Juneteenth* and *Three Days*, not to mention those excerpts published in periodicals and collections during Ellison’s lifetime, is a unique form of play, commingling pleasure and pain, akin to Barthes’ notion of *jouissance*. An

ecstatic reading registers the raw force of the chaotic text, which refuses phallogentric, transcendental claims to mastery and closure.

De-centering the paradigm of father-originator and son-text contributes to the project of deconstructing the author function by emphasizing the vulnerable, reciprocal nature of our interactions with one another and the inherently dialogical aspects of our efforts to express ourselves. For, as Bakhtin reminds us, “the word in language is half someone else’s” (293). Reimagining Ellison and his novel in this way reiterates the unknowability of any “author” and the limits of reading a text by way of the author function. Borges makes this point in his brief poetic meditation “Borges y yo,” wherein he explores the slippage between the writing self, the “author” called “Borges,” and the subject he calls “I.” The poem opens: “The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to” (51), invoking the otherness of the writing self and welcoming alterity. Such a move defamiliarizes our assumptions and desires to “know” the author and his intentions and thus fix the meaning of his work. Borges implies that such knowledge is ultimately elusive, even to the author himself, observing: “I do not know which of us has written this page” (51). This calls our attention to the gap between the “author” and the “I”: the very gap the author function works tirelessly to conceal.

Postscript: *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*<sup>35</sup>

Amid Ralph Ellison’s papers, I came across a simple message written on a slip of paper in faded pencil dated June 24, 1991: “R’s tale / when you find it” (II:65/5). This

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<sup>35</sup> Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*



note, jotted down toward the end of Ellison's life, floats unmoored in the teeming archive of notes and drafts related to the Hickman novel. I read this ecstatic note as an exemplar of Barthes' "friendly return" of the author that harkens back to the decades of labor woven into the writing of Ralph's tale, even as its second-person address gestures forward to an open invitation to the active reader to play with and explore a text with "no easily recognizable points of rest" (*Collected Essays* 504). In spite of Ellison's being a writer who was utterly devoted to what he termed the "stern discipline," and who attempted to safeguard the reader from "incompletion of form" (*Juneteenth* "Notes" 363), his capacious novel productively eludes the stringencies of formal perfection. In turn, the unbound, unsigned text assigns the dialogical task of meaning-making precisely in the realm of the reader's imagination.

Rather than interpreting this as a shame or a failure as a biographical reading of authorial intention might, let us instead embrace how this text might surprise its readers with its whimsical content and chaotic forms, just as it likely did its author. A clue into navigating the broader novel's textured landscapes and soundscapes may lie in listening to its jazz temporality, as a hybrid and ongoing production, as Fred Moten and John Callahan have done so fruitfully with their respective readings of *Invisible Man*.<sup>36</sup> Inviting such complexity into our readings allows us to celebrate Ellison's prowess as a consummate writer with a jazzman's sensibilities, while also allowing the text itself to *play*, as Barthes insists, "in all its polysemy" ("From Work to Text" 152), in the dynamic, even dissonant mode of improvisation. This ecstatic model admittedly requires willing

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<sup>36</sup> See Moten *In the Break* 63-74 and Callahan *In the African-American Grain* 150-88.

readers, while recognizing that reading, like writing, is a function that is never free of ideological assumptions.

With its time-obsessed thematics, prolonged writing time, and posthumous publication history, Ellison's novel demands a reckoning with superfluity—with its heft, its archive, its proliferating forms and their temporal excess, it asks *us*: What will you *make* of me? For alongside the enduring power and poignancy of *Invisible Man* and Ellison's critical essays is the legacy of a text that remains enigmatic and abundant with the raw energy of the chaotic novel, endlessly proffering the ecstatic experience of reading it. We pour our wishes for closure into posthumous text's restless spaces, but the unassimilable text insists upon the futural possibilities of becoming. Ellison's novel is paradigmatic of the posthumous text's uncertain status, which discloses to us that our deaths are never fixed: these traces register our longing to *be* in the world, to be cared for, even after our demise, just as our own handlings of posthumous texts often divulge our impossible desire to know the author/other. Such an impulse is astoundingly strong and pervasive, as my next chapter demonstrates, in the case of Sylvia Plath's posthumous legacy. If Ellison's author function is troubled by his so-called failed politics and second novel, readings of Plath's work are decidedly obsessed with the personal and domestic.

## Chapter Two

### Signing the Other's Signature: The Posthumous Circulation of Sylvia Plath's

#### *The Bell Jar* (1963)

There is something incantatory about the repetition of the author's biography that transmits the message that we know her, and thus we know her work. In beginning this chapter about Sylvia Plath's posthumous legacy, I am aware of a certain need to make evident my own "knowledge" of the same "facts," in order to convey that I, too, am channeling the same Sylvia Plath whom we all "know." Through this repetition of so-called facts, a pleasurable spell is cast on the critic/reader who recognizes the familiar narrative that inheres as the author function: Plath was born in Massachusetts in 1932; her father, an imposing figure whom Plath adored, died when she was eight; she attended Smith College on a scholarship; she attempted suicide upon returning home after her summer stint as college editor at *Mademoiselle* in New York in 1953; she moved to Cambridge on a Fulbright in 1956, where she met and married English poet Ted Hughes; they had two children, Frieda and Nicholas; Plath separated from Hughes when she learned of his affair with Assia Wevill; Plath killed herself shortly thereafter in her London flat, once lived in by Yeats, on February 11, 1963, in one of the coldest winters on record. These facts are recounted over and over, with the odd addition: she did theater in Cambridge, or she learned to keep bees in Devon, as her father did when she was a child. Such additions are relished as new means by which to decode secrets about Plath's life buried in her writing. But what do we really *know* when we claim to know such things? What are the limits of practicing biographical criticism? Where does her writing

fit into this chronological schema? The tacit logic of biographical criticism is that the above life narrative will explain and contain the often unbound thematics of Plath's work.

Plath's resurrection(s) by way of her posthumous texts, however, resist an alignment with the formulation of the author/originator who is redeemed in heteronormative time by the editor/executor. This chapter reads Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) as a posthumous novel—published pseudonymously before her death, then posthumously in her name—whose engagement with states of abjection puts pressure on the biographical critical impulse and its implicit reliance upon the author function. Such an approach ultimately presents a challenge to conceptions of the proper subject and the authorial signature, privileging instead an imagining of the unbound or what I term the ecstatic postwar subject.

Plath's own gravesite performs the fraught status of the proper name and its signature. In the wake of her suicide, her estranged husband Ted Hughes engraved her tombstone at Heptonstall in England with the name "Sylvia Plath Hughes."<sup>37</sup> Such a move enraged many feminists, who held Hughes directly responsible for Plath's death.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, "libbers" and "vandals" repeatedly altered the grave marker by chiseling off Hughes' surname. In response, Hughes had the headstone removed and reinscribed

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<sup>37</sup> The marker also bears a quotation from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Even amidst fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted." Allegedly, Plath had expressed wishes to be buried elsewhere, in the churchyard cemetery near Court Green, the house she shared with Hughes in Devon.

<sup>38</sup> In an infamous example, radical poet Robin Morgan's poem "Arraignment" (1970) opens by accusing Hughes of Plath's murder. She indicts him for rape and for brainwashing his and Plath's children, and goes on to descry that "it is not illegal for him to make a mint / by becoming her posthumous editor" (76). The poem concludes with Morgan's threat to appear one night at Hughes' home to castrate and shoot him (78).

with his name after each incidence, then reinstalled in the cemetery. The struggle over Plath's proper name—its being carved in stone, and so tethered to Hughes' for time immemorial, only to be erased for a time by feminist activists—bears the sign of physical and rhetorical violence; the name Hughes, Plath's husband-turned-executor, is never quite absent, even in its violent erasure.<sup>39</sup> This graveside scene stages the pro-Plath and pro-Hughes factions that have battling since Plath's suicide, perpetuating a biographical approach to her work that respectively reveres and demonizes her apparently inextricable roles as woman (that is, wife/mother) and writer.

By introducing sexual politics into a consideration of the posthumous text, Plath's legacy defamiliarizes the denotation of the term posthumous as pertaining to the death of the father/author/originator. The provocative exchanges enacted at her gravesite blur the distinction between the private and public spheres, demonstrating how considerations of Plath's work have been obsessed with the personal and domestic. The biographical method as the predominant approach to Plath's work remains immured in a patriarchal structure predicated upon a male-centered model of presence. The reinscriptions of Plath's tombstone—both with and without the name "Hughes"—imply a knowledge of what Plath would have wanted it to say, and supply the illusion of giving her, in effect, the last word. There exists an unshakable desire to know the author/other by way of the

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<sup>39</sup> Images of the altered marker reveal a crude, pronounced place where "Hughes" was erased. See Rose (65, 111) and Stevenson (304) for accounts of Plath's unsettled tombstone. An article by Sarah Womack in *The Telegraph* reports that the marker now bears the name "Sylvia Plath Hughes" on a replacement headstone in bronze lettering, making it easier to repair ("Locals Fear Sylvia Plath Film Will Revive Attacks on Grave" 29 July 2002 Web).

most private “facts” of her life, and to act on her behalf in the absence of her physical presence and express wishes, or even in spite of them, as in the case of *The Bell Jar*’s posthumous publication in Plath’s name. The desire to know the author/other and to have her live up to an ideal is strong, as critics long to link Plath’s work in direct correspondence to her biography and autobiographical writings as a means to account for her untimely death, and to fix the meaning of her work. A consideration of Plath’s legacy must reckon with these intimate registers, but it need not subscribe to their underlying logic.

Plath’s name, as evidenced by her signature—signed by Hughes—stands in to authorize her multiple posthumous publications, raising questions about the contours of sovereignty and its attendant property. When Plath died, there was doubt as to whether she had signed divorce papers. As a result, Plath’s papers were left intestate (Rose 65), and Hughes assumed the executorship over her estate. Leaving one’s papers intestate, or without a will, or a witness to bind its meaning, registers the vulnerable domain in which the posthumous text resides. The etymology referring as it does to both the male reproductive organ, from the Latin *testis*, and to the act of testifying or bearing witness, further clarifies the masculinist schema by which the posthumous work is made legible. To have left a will is to imbue one’s papers with intentionality. In the absence of such a document, Plath’s papers have had a will imposed upon them, and not by Hughes alone, but also by the critic and reader, as well. Many critics have rejected Hughes’ editorial moves as they appear self-serving—softening his culpability for their separation and Plath’s distress prior to her suicide, or ensuring his own financial gain. In many regards,

the work of biographical criticism suggests that we, as critics, would sign the papers for Plath, instructing others of her actual wishes, perhaps, like Hughes, in self-serving fashion—positioning Plath as a feminist icon of mythic status, for instance.

In his foreword to Plath's posthumously published and abridged journals (1982), Hughes describes a teleological process whereby Plath arrived at her "real" self, as expressed in her *Ariel* poems.<sup>40</sup> Hughes avers that killing "the old false self is the birth of the new real one," and that "*Ariel* and the associated later poems give us the voice of that self. They are the proof that it arrived. All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation" (xi-xii). This problematic formulation subscribes to a teleological progression into selfhood and implicitly lumps *The Bell Jar* among Plath's "waste products." Accordingly, Jacqueline Rose notes that if Plath's poetry has been elevated to the level of high art, her prose has been defaced as commodified and banal (73). Paradoxically, waste is figured as the sign of the abject—that which has no form—even as such waste is necessary for the assumption of a self: in expelling what is other to one's self, one maintains the illusion of mastery and self-composure.

A belief in a stable, authentic self is wrapped up with notions of ownership, as emblemized by the signature that stands in for the author's consent and presence.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Hughes assures the reader that Plath's posthumously edited journals and poetry

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<sup>40</sup> Plath's unabridged journals were published in 2000, edited by Karen Kukil, with the permission of the Plath estate. Hughes had sealed two journals until 2013—the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Plath's death—but changed his mind before his passing in 1998. One is about Plath's time as a writer and an instructor at Smith in Boston, the other is about her psychotherapy with Ruth Beuscher.

<sup>41</sup> See Derrida "Signature Event Context" 328

deliver her “real” voice. Such a statement, however, is prone to displacement given the fact that Hughes published her *abridged* journals, and rearranged Plath’s final *Ariel* poems. According to Hughes, a US publisher wanted him to cut Plath’s original arrangement of *Ariel* to twenty poems: “the fear seemed to be that the whole lot might provoke some sort of backlash—some revulsion.”<sup>42</sup> Hughes edited the work, both removing and adding poems from the collection so as to circumvent the reader’s supposed encounter with Plath’s abject, revolting material. Critics of Hughes note that these editorial decisions are not unrelated to his having burned Plath’s final journal to protect his children from having to read it (Rose 104). In spite of its being burned, the shadow trace of this journal still circulates as critics speculate endlessly in regards to its contents. Owing to these editorial decisions, Hughes is figured consistently by critics as a failed and bowdlerizing executor, with the exception of his defenders, most notably his sister, turned Plath-executor, Olwyn Hughes. Ironically, however, it is his uncertain role as husband/executor that estranges us from the knowable author of biographical criticism and its subscription to a recoverable Plath, for the editor/executor stands in for the late author, signing her name in her absence, but he is never quite she.

The author’s posthumous traces are vulnerable in the wake of her demise, demonstrating, in amplified fashion, the ecstatic dynamics of deferral and displacement. A brief sketch of the publication of Plath’s *Ariel* demonstrates how the posthumous text is dependent upon an other for its place in the world. Prior to her death, Plath arranged

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<sup>42</sup> For Hughes’ full comments, see his 1995 interview “The Art of Poetry: in the Spring issue of *Paris Review*.”



her final poems in a black loose-leaf binder, which she left upon her writing desk. The evocative nature of this image, which has been considered in biographical criticism, in effect, as a suicide note, presents an act of authorial intention. The possibility of reordering, however, as metaphorized by the loose-leaf binder, comes to pass with Hughes' aforementioned editorial moves. He asserted in an interview: "How final was her order? She was forever shuffling the poems in her typescripts—looking for different connections, better sequences. She knew there were always new possibilities, all fluid" ("The Art of Poetry"). It seems that the "real self" Hughes ascribes to Plath in her *Ariel* poems is fluid, after all. Frieda Hughes, Hughes and Plath's daughter and current Plath executor, oversaw a "restored edition" of *Ariel*, published in 2004, for which she wrote the foreword; the text includes a facsimile of Plath's manuscript, with the express aim of establishing Plath's original arrangement. Unlike John F. Callahan, who was a friend of Ellison's but also a longtime scholar of African American literature, the literary executors in Plath's case are most intimate: her husband, then her sister-in-law, Olwyn Hughes, who came to be known as her brother's formidable gatekeeper, and now Plath's daughter. This adds a complex dimension to a consideration of the posthumous text and its afterlives, for the text enters the lives of these executors in ways quite different than in the ostensible emotional remove of an editor or legal representative, seemingly encouraging further biographical readings of the work. Such textual intimacy underscores the dialogical nature of all writing, which emerges in a given moment, but never as a finished product, complete unto itself; the posthumous text displays how editors and readers repeatedly reconstruct texts in and over time, underscoring their ecstatic nature.

While a great deal of textual scholarship exists contesting Hughes' posthumous editing and publication of Plath's *Ariel*, I focus on *The Bell Jar* as a means to reorient the contemplation of Plath's posthumous circulation to include her prose and the productive possibilities that emerge when we resist the siren's call of biographical correspondence.<sup>43</sup> Plath's *oeuvre* has been traditionally understood as a mimetic reflection of her life experiences; in turn, much of the scholarship in Plath studies is compelled by a conservative obedience to the author's stated intentions, for instance, in her journals and letters. Grounding one's reading in the author function, however, is always already an act of reading and interpretation that masquerades as a cohesive truth. This chapter sets the implications of thinking Plath as a stand-in for the modern postwar subject in dialogue with the posthumous formation of her author function. I problematize the pervasive impulse to read Plath's work biographically, engaging her posthumous legacy instead primarily by way of a close reading of *The Bell Jar*'s overdetermined publication history and temporally excessive narrative thematics.

Plath's own decision to publish the novel pseudonymously generates a productive gap between the writing subject and her text. Some scholars date Plath as having begun drafting material for *The Bell Jar* in the late fifties.<sup>44</sup> The novel was completed and revised in a studio at poet W.S. Merwin's home in London in 1961; Plath had finished the

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<sup>43</sup> For more on the posthumous publication of *Ariel*, see Marjorie Perloff. "The Two Ariels: The (Re)making of the Sylvia Plath Canon." *The American Poetry Review* 13.6 (1984): 10-18. Print.

<sup>44</sup> Plath's 1955 story "Tongues of Stone" is set in an asylum and contains incidents that are developed at length in *The Bell Jar*. Melody Zadjel points to the short stories "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men" and "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" (McCann 104) as related material.

novel by late summer, but when she received word that she had won a US-based Saxton Grant fellowship, she submitted sections of the novel to meet its terms. The novel was not accepted for US publication at the end of the fellowship, but Plath had written to her mother and brother that she did not wish it to be, owing to its *roman-a-clef* elements.<sup>45</sup>

*The Bell Jar* was published by Heinemann Press in England in 1963, just one month before Plath's suicide, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas—which was also the original name for the novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood—to largely favorable reviews.<sup>46</sup> The novel's posthumous publications in Plath's name occurred first in England in 1966, then in the United States in 1971, with Ted Hughes' explicit consent and much to the chagrin of Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, owing to the novel's depiction of a strained relationship between its protagonist and her mother. These posthumous publications, authorized by Hughes, prompt an inquiry into the ethics and limits of the authorial signature.

When Hughes signed Plath's name to her pseudonymously-published novel and reissued it posthumously, he shaped the course of the novel being read biographically. This chapter focuses on *The Bell Jar* as an under-considered text in Plath's posthumous legacy and as an exemplar of the posthumous text's uncertain status. In the prevailing account of how the novel came to be published in the US in Plath's name, Janet Malcolm cites a letter that Ted Hughes wrote to Aurelia Plath in 1970, asking for her explicit

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<sup>45</sup> See Lois Ames "Biographical Note." *The Bell Jar*. By Sylvia Plath. NY: Harper & Row: 1971. 14. Print.

<sup>46</sup> Many accounts characterize the reviews as lukewarm, or even negative, but evidence exists to the contrary. Multiple reviews positioned the novel in the context of a Salingeresque work, told from a female perspective, by a promising new female author. See McGrath Smith, in McCann.

permission to print *The Bell Jar* in the US in Plath's name so that he could yield sufficient funds to purchase an additional property in Devon (39).<sup>47</sup> Hughes signs the other's signature, under the mother's gaze, in order to accrue property to his own name. Copyright and property rights, as Foucault evidences, are grounded in a bourgeois world-view predicated upon acquisition and ownership.<sup>48</sup> Malcolm notes Mrs. Plath's deep reluctance, but her ultimate acquiescence; this, according to Malcolm, accounts for Hughes' agreeing to permit Mrs. Plath to collect and publish *Letters Home* in 1975. Mrs. Plath undertook this project as a means to remedy the critical, unflattering mother/daughter relationship that Esther Greenwood narrates in the novel. The publication of *Letters Home* led the typically recalcitrant Hughes to then release Plath's abridged journals in 1982 to lend a more complex picture of Plath's "warring selves."

This chain of posthumous publications surrounding *The Bell Jar*'s posthumous release emphasizes the deferral and displacement inherent in the posthumous text's enigmatic status. Such excess is amplified by the impression of Plath as a suicidal subject, rather than the self-contained proper subject aligned with the law. The provocative implications at work here are that Hughes can appropriate ownership of his late wife's work and distribute it as he chooses, yielding a profit in return; Plath's

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<sup>47</sup> Malcolm's account of Hughes getting Aurelia Plath's permission to publish *The Bell Jar* in Plath's name in the US differs from Frances McCullough's 1996 Preface to *The Bell Jar*, which explains its US publication as the direct result of a copyright loophole that would have allowed canny publishers to publish Plath's novel in her name without consent from her estate. McCullough worked at Harper and Row when Plath completed the manuscript in 1961.

<sup>48</sup> See Foucault "What is an Author?" 130-31

readers, too, demonstrate a belief in unfettered access to her writings, in order to read them properly: that is, by turning to Plath's biography and autobiographical writings as paratexts that decode the "true" meaning of her work. The posthumous text's very excess, in other words, opens it up to appropriation.

In a 2013 interview in *The Guardian*, Olwyn Hughes was asked about the estate's choice to publish *The Bell Jar* in the United States in Plath's name; she replied: "What people want after they're dead. That just goes. And nobody was going to be able to keep the secret about who wrote the book for decades. Besides it was a very good little novel." These remarks lay bare the extent to which we no longer control our material remains in the wake of our demise—the other can now divulge our secret(s). Express wishes become a form of writing, too, subject to interpretation and cooptation. For Derrida, the signature is an illusion of presence. In our physical absence, even in our death, it stands in for our presence to endorse our consent (317). Plath's case makes clear the signature's inability to secure the late author's stated intentions, but it does not dispel the signature's enduring allure, as biographical readings demonstrate.

When Hughes signed Plath's name to *The Bell Jar* in the wake of her suicide, he all but guaranteed that the novel would be read biographically. Hughes' emphasis on Plath's warring selves has been transmuted into critical scholarship by way of the warring camps who alternately champion and deride Plath as an iconic female figure. The well-rehearsed history surrounding Plath's relationship with Hughes and his editing, indeed, many say censorship, of her posthumous legacy has fueled endless biographical readings. Plath's work has been tethered to her biography, as decades worth of articles,

biographies, monographs, and dissertations return compulsively to the unanswerable questions engendered by Plath's relationship with Hughes and her suicide. To eliminate such excess, Plath's autobiographical writings—her posthumously published journals and letters, which were not written for publication or for a public audience—are relied upon to decode her *oeuvre*.

Drawing upon a psychoanalytic and poststructuralist feminist framework, my reading insists on the gap between the writing and written subject. I consider *The Bell Jar*'s excessive publication history as a complement to its thematic investment in what I term an abject temporality that is at subversive odds with modern, teleological experience and standardized time, which has been recognized as white, male, and heteronormative.<sup>49</sup> My destabilizing of Plath's authorial persona is set in dialogue with *The Bell Jar*'s thematic investment with the abject, with the aim of theorizing an ecstatic postwar subject who is not consolidated, self-identical, and proper(tied). In a 1972 review of *The Bell Jar* upon its US release, Patricia Meyer Spacks noted that "the experience of the book is that of electrocution [...] female sexuality is the center of horror: babies in glass jars, women bleeding in childbirth, Esther herself thrown in the mud by a sadist, hemorrhaging after her single sexual experience. To be a woman is to bleed and burn" (164). This enumeration of abject experience in the novel emphasizes *The Bell Jar*'s interest in the perpetual undoing of the female subject: if the subject is made, or done up, she is also always already in danger of being undone.

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<sup>49</sup> See Jack Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Transcultural Lives*. NY: NYU P, 2005. 10. Print. See also Jose Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NY: NYU P, 2009. 25 Print.

*The Bell Jar*'s overdetermined publication history poses provocative questions regarding sexual politics and women's authorship, just as the novel's abject thematics trouble the supposedly smooth contours of so-called (male) selfhood. Though Esther Greenwood marshals a tenuous "I" with which to tell her story, the novel is composed of disjunctive episodes in which Esther frequently experiences a sense of borderlessness that call this "I" into question. Among others, such episodes include: the protracted food poisoning episode following the lavish *Ladies' Day* magazine party luncheon; Esther's suicide attempt following her failed attempt at novel writing; her subsequent institutionalization and electroshock convulsive therapy; and her hemorrhaging after having sex for the first time. These scenes plunge the reader into an abject temporality that subverts progressive coming of age narrative conventions and poses a compelling contrast to the era's pervasive advertising campaigns promoting the sanitized, heterosexual (white) woman.<sup>50</sup> An advertisement for "Sweetheart Soap," for instance, features a woman in a bathtub covered in lather up to her neck. Her gaze engages the camera directly and she smiles, wearing full makeup, including cherry red lipstick. Another advertisement for "Camay's Caressing Care!" "the soap of beautiful women," features a close-up of a blushing bride, holding lilies. Such ads set the backdrop for Plath's novel, whose protagonist suffers a breakdown after working for the summer of 1953 as a guest editor for *Ladies' Day* magazine.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Plath referred to the novel as a "potboiler" in a letter to her mother (*Letters Home* 477).

<sup>51</sup> *Ladies' Day*, according to Plath, was a fictional version of *Mademoiselle*, where she interned. Peter Steinberg cites correspondence between Plath and her editor James Michie discussing the need to change names of characters and institutions to avoid libel (104-5).

*The Bell Jar*'s abject temporality critiques ubiquitous patriarchal structures, as such models are predicated upon the stable presence of the abstract citizen. By repeatedly turning the female body inside out, Plath externalizes and troubles the purportedly knowable contours of Cartesian selfhood, situated in the forward-moving time of personal development, which reflects public progress. In contrast to this Enlightenment model, the novel delves into private states of crises and flux that register the era's paradoxes of social identity. Notably, though finished in 1961, the novel is set in 1953-4. The novel's critique likewise troubles the entrenched reliance upon the author function to read Plath's work, for this dependence upon an author originator is rooted in the patriarchal paradigm of the "great author." To utter Plath's name is to invoke a series of well-rehearsed "facts," images, and their attendant sympathies. But *The Bell Jar*'s preoccupation with the boundary-crossing power of the abject resists the call of normative personhood; such thematics are compounded and elaborated by the excessive quality of the pseudonymous novel's being posthumously circulated in Plath's name. The novel's interest in the subject who comes undone challenges the progressive narrative of the sovereign subject, who can verify what he owns. This is the Text of the unbound subject who threatens the coherence of the very script she is expected to deliver on cue.

#### Reading *The Bell Jar* Against the Grain of the Author Function

It seems that one Plath biography spawns another. With no less than ten biographical studies already in print, 2013 saw three new biographies published; the *New York Times* review of two of these texts concluded that "neither of them radically changes



our picture of her life and death. With Plath, biography is a kind of criticism, and vice versa.”<sup>52</sup> Studies of Plath’s work have been dominated by the biographical, specifically with a focus on the domestic, to such a degree that reading her texts otherwise has largely been ignored as a critical practice, as Tracy Brain contends in *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001). Brain’s call for a critical reorientation to approaches that include the social and political has led to such recent edited collections as *The Unraveling Archive* (2007) and *Representing Plath* (2011). As early as 1976, however, in her aptly titled *Chapters in a Mythology*, Judith Kroll called for a reconsideration of Plath’s work that was not limited to confessional poetics and biographical interpretation. Kroll opens her study with the observation that “the particular renown [Plath] has posthumously won is not the success she intended and deserves. The reading of her work has been entangled in a fascination with her suicide and the broken marriage which preceded it, and such misreading is as widespread among her admirers as among her detractors” (1). The biographically-driven critical work seeks, whether intentionally or not, to name, even diagnose, the poet’s pain, albeit from a critical remove. Arguing against a teleological view of Plath’s poems in *Revising Life* (1994), Susan Van Dyne asserts that “there is no master narrative of [Plath’s] life or her art; neither the pathological understanding of her art as having been determined by her suicidal impulses nor the reading of her actual suicide as a by-product of her textual, metaphoric strategies describes adequately the ways Plath’s poems revised

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<sup>52</sup> See Kirsch, Adam. “Lady Lazarus: Two New Plath Biographies.” *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. Rev. 08 Feb. 2013. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. Rev. of Carl Rollyson. *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath*. St. Martin’s. 2013, Print and Andrew Wilson. *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted*. Scribner. 2013, Print; See also Elizabeth Winder. *Pain, Parties and Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953*. Chatto & Windus, 2013. Print.

her life” (1). In spite of long-standing calls to complicate biographical readings, the allure of the author function persists and works to conceal the gap between author and text wherein Plath’s texts might circulate in ever-widening social contexts.

The author function holds sway over numerous monographs about Plath’s work, which aim to render a totalizing even totalitarian picture of the author’s life and her work. One biography, authored by male and female writers alike, compels another. These accounts, however, are hardly neutral, as factions—pro-Plath or pro-Hughes—construct narratives to validate particular viewpoints of the author’s life and her work. Among these many biographies are two landmark studies that are biographically-driven, but highly self-reflexive in that they question their own investments and reliance upon biography as a critical methodology: Jacqueline Rose’s *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992) and Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1995). In the so-called Plath and Hughes camps, Rose’s book belongs to the former and Malcolm’s to the latter—both writers announce their allegiances explicitly and meditate upon the pressure to do so. Keeping company with Rose’s work, to name a few, is Linda Wagner-Martin’s *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1988) and Steven Axelrod’s *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and Cure of Words* (1992), while Malcolm’s book is in sympathy with Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* (1989), which achieved instant notoriety given the author’s note alluding to “dual authorship” with Ted Hughes’ sister, Olwyn Hughes.<sup>53</sup> Plath’s evolving, narrativized legacy is an extremely gripping one for considering the ethics and limits of

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<sup>53</sup> Stevenson, however, later expressed that she came to feel like Olywn Hughes’ pawn and was explicitly unhappy with the final publication. See Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* (12).

posthumous publication, questions of access and privacy, and how an author's posthumous reputation is highly subject to interpretation and cooptation.

Jacqueline Rose points to the commingling of "denigration and adulation" (39) that compels both Plath criticism and Plath's own poetic tropes. She cites Kristeva's surprising thesis that what is highest, the sovereign self, must perforce emerge from the lowest, the abject. Rose duly notes that Kristeva does not consider any female authors in her study of abjection, but asserts, as do I, that Plath's work is more than fitting for a discussion of the role of abjection in the creative process. While Rose focuses her attention on what I would call the abject thematics of Plath's journal entries and poetry, my emphasis is on *The Bell Jar's* diegetic world, which is repeatedly figured through the temporally disjunctive mode of the abject.

Malcolm's book *The Silent Woman* is based on her series of *New Yorker* articles about Plath and Hughes; as a reporter and creative writer, she delves into what she terms Plath's "posthumous miasma of legend" (25). She is keenly interested in what she refers to repeatedly as the "problem" of biography, which is rooted in the paradox of researching an unknowable subject who, nevertheless, readers (and researchers) believe can be known. Malcolm observes how our most prurient, voyeuristic desires are on parade when we consume an artist's biography. The biographer knows her role is to dig and dig deeper: no stone should remain unturned. Such a project bears a connection to the abject, as an illicit desire to know the other fuels this enterprise to unearth that which is buried from view, ostensibly as a means to decode Plath's work.

Titillating details related to the private and domestic have resulted in biographical criticism ruling the day in Plath studies, obscuring the socio-political import of her work. Tellingly, a blurb by John Cary of *The Sunday Times of London* on the cover of *Lover of Unreason: Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes's Doomed Love*, the biography of Assia Wevill, Hughes' lover and partner after Plath's death, lays this out in the bluntest of terms: "Eye-opening ... To find it limitlessly intriguing you do not need to be interested in Hughes's or Plath's poetry, or in poetry at all, only in people."<sup>54</sup> To find such accounts "limitlessly intriguing" one need not even look at the poetry. This has been the pervasive critical subtext that has emerged because of the obsession with biographical symmetry between artist and text. Though we believe that we *do* care about the poetry (and what of the prose?), much of the critical energy in exploring Plath's work has been trained on the "author's life."

The illusion of knowing the author/other is astoundingly strong in Plath's case; in the years surrounding *Ariel's* posthumous publication and *The Bell Jar's* US publication, Joyce Carol Oates, an ostensible admirer of Plath's writing, makes the following damning observations in a 1973 essay, "The Death Throes of Romanticism":

Plath did not like other people; like many who are persecuted, she identified in a perverse way with her own persecutors, and not with those who, along with her, were victims. [...] Even her own children are objects of her perception, there for the restless scrutiny of her image-making mind, and not there as human beings with a potentiality that would

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<sup>54</sup> Wevill committed suicide in 1969, gassing herself, and her four-year-old daughter with Hughes, Shura.

someday take them beyond their immediate dependency upon her, which she sometimes enjoys and sometimes dreads.

Such an assessment professes to know Plath's state of mind because it assumes a direct correspondence between the author's life and her work. From where and whence does such a judgment arise? Here, Oates situates Plath's biography as knowable and masterable, and Plath as apparently unlikeable. But as Michael Davidson emphasizes, "appeals to transcendence may, as Joyce Carol Oates argues, reflect Plath's debts to Romanticism, but they no less recognize that the 'I' is a role or masquerade" (182). By positioning Plath as the last in a line of Romantic writers, Oates falls prey to the critical impulse to situate Plath as the apolitical lone genius, divorced in Oates' account, from all meaningful human engagement. Like Davidson's, my focus is on Plath's writerly engagement with multiplicity and the diffuseness of being, what Kristeva terms as the *sujet en procès*—the subject in process and on trial—with an eye toward the broader socio-political implications of such cultural production.<sup>55</sup>

The debate that unfolded in second wave feminist circles between a humanistic belief in the essence of the female signature, and a poststructuralist skepticism of such an approach, is in conversation with these different responses to Plath's work. My own reading privileges the latter, emphasizing Plath's novel's interest in masking and performance, as well as abjection. In "Writing Like a Woman," Peggy Kamuf critiques Patricia Meyer Spacks' affirmation of the female signature, which, in Kamuf's estimation, reduces "the literary work to its signature and to the tautological assumption

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<sup>55</sup> See Julia Kristeva. *Revolution in Poetic Language* *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. NY: Columbia UP, 1984. 37. Print.

that the feminine ‘identity’ is one which signs itself with a feminine name.” Kamuf goes on to advocate alternatively, if “by ‘feminist’ one understands a way of reading texts that points to the masks of truth with which phallogentrism hides its fictions, then one place to begin such a reading is by looking behind the mask of the proper name” (285-86). Nancy Miller enters the debate in an issue of *Diacritics*, arguing for a recuperation of the female signature (53), while Kamuf, in the same issue, remains in favor of an approach that continually contests and interrogates the making and masking of cultural truths, in order that feminist discourse might proceed self-reflexively (“Replacing Feminist Criticism” 47).<sup>56</sup> Like Kamuf, I read the effects of the signature as inextricable from a tradition of ownership, predicated upon the privileging of the abstract male subject, and look instead to the generative gap between the writing subject and her text.

Still, the enduring perception of Plath’s work as discoverable and masterable by way of biography can be heard in Plath’s friend and fellow writer A. Alvarez’s claim that “[Plath’s] late poems read as if they were written posthumously” (qtd. in Malcolm 58). In other words, her poems provide answers and explanations of her decision to take her own life. In her 1972 review of Alvarez’s study of suicide, whose opening section is a meditation on Plath’s death, Marjorie Perloff notes that Plath’s work has been reduced to biographical interpretation and has taken on the aura of a cult led by Plath, its “high priestess,” a martyr to feminism. Plath’s posthumously published volumes of poetry have “the status of sacred texts” (Perloff 581-2) that must be unquestionably revered as reflective of the author’s life experiences. Perloff’s critique raises the questions: how do

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<sup>56</sup> See *Diacritics* 12 (1982)

we produce the other posthumously? To what extent are such productions only ever receptacles for our own desires? Though Plath, for decades, has been positioned by both supporters and detractors alike in a Romantic vein as a possessed vessel, speaking spontaneously from another world, there is ample evidence amid her papers that she worked diligently on her craft, drafting extensively before arriving at a “finished” text.<sup>57</sup>

Containing Plath’s writing into readings that reflect a solitary figure is to discount the many socio-political insights that her body of work, and her prose, no less, lends to our understandings of the mid-century. If Ellison’s fiction and his public role as a black artist fell under scrutiny for his not taking a sociological realist approach to his fiction, Plath, as a white woman writer, is expected to testify to the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal world; her personal world is made to stand in for a shared experience of suffering for (white) women. As Ellison opted to write in a high modernist register that is aligned with white men, his fiction and stated intentions regarding art’s universality were often criticized—sentiments that were then transposed upon his failure to finish his second novel. Nevertheless, Ellison’s fiction is considered art, while in Plath’s case, her prose is treated as thinly-veiled autobiography, aligning the woman writer with the personal. *The Bell Jar* implicitly takes on and unsettles the false binaries of public/private, outer/inner, low/high, through its sustained interest in the boundary-crossing force of abjection, thereby complicating a critical reliance upon the author function.

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<sup>57</sup> See Tracy Brain. *The Other Sylvia*, and Robin Peel. “*The Bell Jar* Manuscripts, Two January 1962 Poems, ‘Elm,’ and *Ariel*.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 23.3-4 (2000): 441-54. Print.

## The Abject Temporality of *The Bell Jar*: Coming Undone in the Metropolis

*The Bell Jar* is a proto-feminist text that is acutely aware of the demands of social identity in mid-century America; its episodic narrative subtly, and at times overtly, registers mid-century America's rampant sexism and racism and its rejection of non-heteronormative sexuality. The novel's protagonist Esther Greenwood wins a magazine contest that lands her a job for the summer in New York as a guest editor at *Ladies' Day* magazine. She finds that she can pass as a sophisticated city girl by donning the trendy garb she impulsively buys with her scholarship money, but she is painfully aware of her own performance of (white) femininity—at one desirous to perform convincingly and simultaneously repelled by such demands.<sup>58</sup>

In the novel's opening, Esther signals a critical distance from her own image as she describes a photograph taken at a rooftop party in which she mingles with handsome "American men," and imagines viewers' reactions: "Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car" (*BJ* 2). Esther imparts her sense that she should feel nothing but elation and gratitude at this coveted opportunity, the sign that she has made it, but instead she feels only alienation and ambivalence during her time in the city—feelings that intensify upon her return home to the suburbs. She has been conditioned to desire this very role, but at the same time she

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<sup>58</sup> For instances of Esther referring to her own social performance and to masking, see *The Bell Jar* pp. 3; 13; 18-9; 22; 29; 31; 37; 74.



cannot disentangle it from her life experiences to date, which have withheld from her the privileges accorded to the social elite. Later in the novel, after Esther has attempted suicide and is institutionalized, she denies that she is the girl in the photograph when one of the other asylum patients recognizes her in a society magazine (*BJ* 207). This rejection of her seeming status as a privileged white woman—“one of the lucky ones” (*BJ* 7)—is central to the novel’s depiction and critique of postwar social identity and consumerism.

*The Bell Jar*’s critique of, but at times complicity with, white womanhood hinges upon its self-reflexive treatment of femininity as a masquerade enmeshed in patriarchal discourses of power and surveillance of self and other. In her 1929 essay, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere provocatively contends that “womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (213). Here, Riviere suggests that there is no difference between femininity and masquerade or, in other words, there is no “true” woman behind the mask. Mary Ann Doane takes up Riviere’s claim, arguing for masquerade as a strategy of female resistance; Doane contends that the stylized nature of masquerade points to a gap in the sign (woman), so that “in flaunting femininity, it holds it at a distance” (81). Accordingly, Doane affirms masquerade as a strategic means by which women can play with their image. Such an insight sheds light on *The Bell Jar*’s engagement with the performativity of social identity.

The novel’s interrogation of upward social mobility, significantly invoked at the novel’s outset, holds abstract citizenship and self-possession at a distance. Following her

magazine internship in the city, Esther returns to her mother's home and makes plans to write her first novel; she thinks, "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise" (*BJ* 120). This key quotation reinforces Esther's awareness of the performativity of identity and her impulse toward masquerade, if not mimicry, which feminists have aligned with greater intentionality. As Carole-Anne Tyler explains, "Femininity is an unwitting masquerade, while mimicry is a witty redoubling of that doubling inherent to femininity" (27-8). Esther's heroine in disguise statement revisits this chapter's meta-issue of biographical criticism dominating studies of Plath's work. To read this statement as Plath's—in other words, she *is* Esther Greenwood—is to be reabsorbed back into the biographical pursuit of meaning and correspondence between the author's experiences and her writing. To read it, in contrast, as a commentary upon femininity as a masquerade, is to present writing in the mode of the social and of a wider critique, wherein the writing self is a dimension of the text, but biography is not the key to unlock all readings.

Though the novel reads as intensely personal—an effect heightened by the use of a first-person narration—it is, in fact, deeply social and conscious of social performativity.<sup>59</sup> When Esther learns that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg have been executed for treason—an event that is cited in the novel's opening sentence—she is being photographed as a *Ladies' Day* magazine guest editor, posed on a pink velvet loveseat, holding a paper rose. She describes an uncontrollable impulse to cry, even as she tries to

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<sup>59</sup> Plath wrote in a response piece, "Context," in *London Magazine* (1962), prior to the novel's publication: "The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America."

smile “obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist dummy” (*BJ* 102). This staging of white femininity for the camera signals the role of woman as image; the novel juxtaposes Esther’s inability to smile in the face of the Rosenbergs’ grisly execution, bringing rhetorical and material violence into a subversive dialogue.<sup>60</sup> The novel’s sustained pattern of images related to abjection, here of execution by the state, highlights the threat, as well as the liberatory potential of the unbound subject.

In reading Plath’s novel, it is important to ask to what degree the text is complicit with white privilege and to what extent it performs a critique of its punishing demands, both on white subjects and marginalized subjects alike. At times, Esther seems to aspire to occupy the space of white privilege—a subject position that finds itself at home in the nation-state, while the racialized, gendered and class-marked other must always “keep her place”—whereas at other times, Esther identifies with ethnic others. In various moments of recognition, she avers, I was a “big smudgy-edged Chinese woman” (*BJ* 18), or “I was a sick Indian” (*BJ* 112). These moments tellingly transpire in moments of abjection, wherein Esther senses the gap between her reflection in the mirror and her imagined ideal “self.” Esther at once identifies with racialized others, even as she reinscribes notions of otherness by associating race with abjection. Such moments in the novel are in dialogue with the overdetermined, abject space of the asylum. If health is aligned with the regulated subject, then the asylum is the space for those failed subjects who cannot regulate themselves. *The Bell Jar* is narrated retrospectively, revealing in its

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<sup>60</sup> Steven Axelrod traces the trope of torture in “Plath and Torture: Cultural Contexts for Plath’s Imagery of the Holocaust” in *Representing Plath* (2011).

telling the social matrix that enmeshes us all, both giving birth to us and against which we struggle. Esther's movement toward, into and eventually away from the asylum, is anything but sequential and progressive, as the novel's non-linear, episodic narration suggests.

Importantly, inasmuch as abjection is aligned with peripheral modes of being in this era, it is also the site of a radical rejection of social norms. Plath's novel is saturated with binarizing, either/or ideologies of the fifties. Nevertheless, the novel demonstrates how post-WWII narratives of heteronormativity constantly break down, as Alan Nadel argues in *Containment Culture*, and so must be continually performed and policed to remain legible to others. Within this milieu, Plath's novel actively engages with and rejects what it means to be perceived as (white) marriage material in this era. Counter to expectations of the era, Esther experiences utter disappointment when her boyfriend, the all-American medical student Buddy Willard, who espouses an open disregard for her aspirations to be a writer (*BJ* 56), proposes marriage. This resonates intertextually with Michael Davidson's reading of Plath's 1962 poem "The Applicant," written contemporaneously with *The Bell Jar*, in which the speaker slips from an employer interrogating an applicant to a prospective husband inspecting the goods of a bride; the former remarks, "It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk" (*Collected Poems* 222).<sup>61</sup> The pronoun "it" obscures the gap between woman and her performance of femininity, turning she into an it, or machine. For Esther, the role of white womanhood is an

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<sup>61</sup> See Davidson *Guys Like Us* 187

overdetermined performance: one she paradoxically longs to inhabit, inasmuch as she perceives it as a form of death.

Esther's complex initiation into white womanhood transpires by way of consuming luxury items. She goes on a "buying spree" with her scholarship funds (*BJ* 7), and when she is taken out to lunch by the magazine executives, she orders a "string" of the "richest, most expensive dishes" (*BJ* 25), consuming them voraciously and swiftly, though without garnering the other diners' notice. Esther's awareness of white femininity's demands and her complex violation of them demonstrate Sandra Bartky's Foucauldian application of discipline and power to reading how femininity is constructed and policed in a patriarchal framework. Bartky asserts that women police themselves in the production and maintenance of "docile bodies" (63) by way of their conscious and unconscious attention to size, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and ornamentation. This disciplinary power registers not only on the body, but also at the psychic level: in the form of guilt, anxiety, and dread over ever meeting the prized standard of heteronormative femininity. Esther's surveillance of self and other throughout the novel and her ambivalence regarding these norms are exerted on and in her body, culminating repeatedly in her encounters with abject temporality. Plath's novel traces Esther's paradoxical entrapment as one who at times aspires to the privilege of white womanhood, even as she also resists its demands.

The novel's abject temporality performs a defamiliarization of white womanhood and abstract national belonging that exposes the impossible, elusive demands of shoring up a fixed self, walled off from the external world. The abject, in contrast, is that which

upsets the seemingly smooth contours of the self with its reminders of the body's ability to produce or reveal its "insides," as in the case of blood, or vomit—a concept that has strong relevance for a novel like *The Bell Jar*, with its portrayal of a culture that is preoccupied with maintaining legible contours of social identity. Kristeva observes that the process of abjection is central first to shaping and later maintaining the borders of the self and, in literature, operates as a site of disgust, but also of creativity ("Approaching Abjection" 11). Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a productive means to address *The Bell Jar*'s inquiry into the body's inherent vulnerability and attendant temporality. According to Kristeva, "The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" ("Approaching Abjection" 9). This expansive claim regarding the time of abjection and its doubleness—it both obscures and unveils—implies the generative potential of abject temporality. The feminist theory of abjection enables us to think through *The Bell Jar*'s discontinuous temporal modes and critical stakes regarding social identity in a more nuanced fashion than does biographical criticism, as it offers a method to engage the permeability of the parameters drawn around 1950s white femininity.

Lacan, drawing upon Freud's articulation of the unconscious as a site of repressed desires, posits that each subject is born into a preexisting system of language that is passively acquired from without and which functions to mediate the subject's perception of reality ("The Agency of the Letter" 148). The assumption of language is an experience of fundamental alienation, characterized by loss, as in order to forge an identity and assume the "I," the infant must relinquish the wholeness he experienced in the imaginary

register: a time of plenitude spent in communion with his mother. Upon entering the symbolic order, the subject maintains an asymptotic relationship to the imaginary register, but is largely unable to recapture this feeling of belonging (“The Agency of the Letter” 166). Kaja Silverman explains that the Cartesian “I” “assumes itself to be fully conscious ... and hence fully self-knowable ... it offers us a narrator who imagines that he speaks without simultaneously being spoken, who believes himself to be outside of discourse” (*The Subject of Semiotics* 128). Plath’s novel, in contrast, emphasizes the multiplicity of being, which effectively exposes the impossibility of the unassailable, integral Enlightenment self, coded as white, male, heterosexual and propertied.

Kristeva observes that the process of abjection, or expelling what is “other” to oneself, is central to shaping and later maintaining the bounds of one’s subjectivity. Though this process begins in infancy, it remains on the fringes of consciousness, and is not actually repressed, as the subject must continuously police her borders to maintain her identity in the symbolic order. Kristeva explains, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (“Approaching Abjection” 4). The abject upsets the smooth contours of the self with its reminders of the body’s ability to produce or reveal its “insides,” as in the case of blood, or excrement. As Cecilia Sjöholm notes, “Bodily fluids mark a separation between inner and outside world; the body acquires a fragile contour through disgust” (98). In this way, the body assumes its shape and legibility by means of expelling and disowning its secretions and that of others. Kristeva argues that the abject, with its solicitation of

disgust, can serve, nevertheless, as a source of revelation and creativity, particularly in the domain of literature (“Approaching Abjection” 11). By repeatedly turning the female body inside out, *The Bell Jar* exposes the inadequacies of the model of Cartesian selfhood.

Plath’s novel takes stock of how abject temporality and its attendant revelations work in *The Bell Jar* as an alternative to mid-century culture’s repressive standards of rationality and regulation. An early episode in the novel occurs at a ladies luncheon sponsored by *Ladies’ Day* magazine that sets the scene for Esther’s repeated encounter with abject temporality in the novel. Esther subverts feminine proprieties, noting that “while we were standing up behind our chairs listening to the welcome speech, I had bowed my head and secretly eyed the position of the bowls of caviar” (*BJ* 26). Esther’s “secretly [eyeing]” of the luxury item caviar, reiterates the novel’s interest in surveillance of self and other, indicating Esther’s awareness that her desire to consume all of the food in sight is a violation of race, class, and gender norms. The luncheon’s excess is a source of attraction and, later, revulsion, when she purges all she has eaten there. While touring the “celestially white kitchens” (*BJ* 48) where the luncheon’s rich signature dishes have been staged for a magazine photo shoot, Esther recalls feeling “dizzy” (*BJ* 26); in contrast to this scene of excess, she recalls how “[her] grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat loaf and had the habit of saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, ‘I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound,’ which always made [her] feel [she] was somehow eating pennies instead of a Sunday roast” (*BJ* 26). This emphasis upon Esther’s class-consciousness is notable, as



being in the lap of luxury in the city is inseparable, in ecstatic fashion, from sense memories of her former eating acts, characterized by frugality.

This crossing of class lines and timelines persists as the luncheon gets underway. Esther sustains her deployment of the language of espionage, describing how “under cover of the clinking of water goblets and silverware and bone china, I paved my plate with chicken slices. Then I covered the chicken slices with caviar thickly as if I were spreading peanut butter on a piece of bread. Then I picked up the chicken slices in my fingers one by one, rolled them so the caviar wouldn’t ooze off and ate them” (*BJ* 27). The diction here emphasizes excess: paved, covered, thickly, spreading, ooze. Esther’s comparison of covering the chicken with caviar to the act of spreading peanut butter on bread, generates another class-inflected comparison. Eating in this scene is related to pleasure, but also repression, as signaled by her self-awareness and subterfuge, as she operates “under cover.” Additionally, the crab-stuffed avocados at the luncheon conjure sense memories of her childhood, when Esther’s grandfather, a waiter at a country club, would smuggle an avocado home with him under his soiled shirts as a gift for her (*BJ* 28). Esther has moved from the waiter class to the waited upon, but her upward mobility is hardly uni-directional or progressive—she remains well aware of having won a contest, for instance, to assume her “place” in such wealthy company. The crossing of class lines, as such, is key to the novel’s interest in abjection and its time of revelation.

The epilogue to the luncheon episode is an imminent bout with food poisoning that ushers Esther into realm of abject temporality. Esther gets violently ill following the luncheon and her viewing of a film culminating in a heterosexual romance. The novel

blurs cultural consumption and literal consumption when Esther reveals, “I felt in terrible danger of puking. I didn’t know whether it was the awful movie giving me a stomachache or all that caviar I had eaten” (*BJ* 42). Back in the all-female Amazon Hotel, where the magazine interns are housed for the summer, Esther’s former composure comes undone:

I sat down on the toilet and leaned my head over the edge of the washbowl and I thought I was losing my guts and my dinner both. The sickness rolled though me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over and then I would feel it rising up in me again, and the glittering white torture-chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and on all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces. (*BJ* 44)

Significantly, the passage’s likening of abject temporality to the rolling of great waves drowns any illusions of the contained self—she fears she is losing her guts. Like the experience of the oceanic described here, Kristeva’s analysis of the semiotic is characterized in terms of the unformulated and excessive, or as that which resists restraint; the semiotic, in turn, can be suffocating. This temporalized sensation of abject formlessness is coupled with the “white torture-chamber tiles” that signify Esther’s positionality within the realm of white sanitized womanhood. The image of the torture chamber, in turn, will recur during Esther’s ECT sessions.

This staging of abjection in the bathroom rehearses the semiotic as within the symbolic, but disrupting its seeming contours. The novel figures this struggle as an ongoing process—a process that the abject encounter stimulates and demands. Human

experience as always already temporalized takes on a subversive force in the time of abjection:

I don't know how long I kept at it. I let the cold water in the bowl go on running loudly with the stopper out, so anybody who came by would think I was washing my clothes, and then when I felt reasonably safe I stretched out on the floor and lay quite still. It didn't seem to be summer any more. I could feel the winter shaking my bones and banging my teeth together, and the big white hotel towel I had dragged down with me lay under my head numb as a snowdrift. (*BJ* 44-5)

Significantly, abject temporality is on the fringes of clock time, as summer turns to winter in this whitest of bathrooms. As Kristeva notes, "The time of the polylogue is not a stoppage of time—something beyond time" ("Polylogue" 345). That Esther is never outside of the symbolic order is clear as she still considers what the Other will think: she must pretend she is washing her clothes. Unlike her rebellious friend Doreen, who vomits in the hallway after a night of partying with an older man (*BJ* 22), Esther secrets herself in the bathroom, out of view, pretending to be the site of cleanliness, even in her abjection.

Vomiting operates as a critique of materialism, emblemized by the luncheon's sponsorship by an ad-driven women's magazine, and, by extension, the impossibility of maintaining the proprieties associated with a successful performance of "pure" white womanhood. Esther loses consciousness and wakes up in her bed in the Amazon Hotel. This episode produces a vision, fostered in the double time of abjection, of the

“celestially white kitchens of *Ladies’ Day* stretching into infinity”; she elaborates: “I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink mottled claw meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise and the bland yellow cup with its rim of alligator-green cradling the whole mess. Poison” (*BJ* 48). In the “celestially white kitchens,” the delicate pink meat pokes seductively through its white blanket while being photographed, conjuring an image of countless white women being groomed for the domestic sphere and consumption by the male gaze.

Esther’s alignment of the demands of white middle to upper-class femininity with “Poison” transmits the novel’s exposure of and resistance to patriarchal demands, and of women’s complicity with such norms. The brilliant lights both accentuate and threaten to spoil the delicacy of this luxury item. Esther’s profuse vomiting leads to her indictment of the staging and commodification of white femininity, rattling her previously-held aspirations to acquire the lifestyle laid out in the pages of *Ladies’ Day*. Kristeva explains that “the abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away” (“Approaching Abjection” 15). *The Bell Jar* goes to the “abominable limits” of the female body and in doing so puts pressure on the concept of the stable self. In her theorization of the exclusionary social matrix, Butler asserts that normative subject formations depend upon the exclusion of those deemed as inhabiting unlivable positions—those abject others who dwell in the margins of the dominant fiction, but who are necessary for its very constitution (*Gender Trouble* 142). *The Bell Jar* conflates

dominant and peripheral positions in Esther's character, exposing the repressive social matrix that enmeshes one and all, albeit in particularized ways according to one's subject position.

The breakdown of the self/other distinction in the time of abjection is not unrelated to the Cold War era's broader paranoia regarding the penetration of boundaries under a foreign policy of containment.<sup>62</sup> Critics have noted that these anxieties were projected onto the domestic context, and specifically onto the homosexual other.<sup>63</sup> Though critics like Michael Davidson emphasize Esther's homophobic response to the revelation of Joan Giling's lesbianism, after Esther walks in on Joan in bed with another asylum patient DeeDee (*BJ* 178), my reading of Esther's complex attitude toward sexuality focuses on her feelings about Doreen, the magazine interns' resident bad girl. After Esther purges herself from the luncheon's poisonous call to ensconce herself in white privilege, it is Doreen who greets Esther with gifts and sarcastic humor when she

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<sup>62</sup> The image of communism as a stream recurs in George Kennan's 1947 essay, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," published by "X," in which he coins the political strategy of containment. Kennan says of the Kremlin: "Its political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to in the basin of world power. But if it finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them" (7). See *Foreign Affairs*. 25.4 (1947): 566-582. Print. Alongside *The Bell Jar*, thematics of borderlessness likewise recur in Plath's poetics, as in "Medusa" (224-6), "Lady Lazarus" (244-6) "The Rabbit Catcher" (193-4), and her radio play *Three Women* (*Collected Poems* 176-87).

<sup>63</sup> See Nadel, who links the closet to the policy of containment (31), and Davidson (161); in Chapter Six of *Guys Like Us*, Davidson performs a reading of Esther's queer feelings for Joan Giling. In his discussion of the novel's moments of sexual panic, Davidson argues that "heterosexuality must win out while lesbianism must be killed off, lest the bell jar—now fully revealed as the threat of same-sex desire—descends once again" (186).

returns to consciousness, making Esther laugh in a notable instance of happiness. Significantly, this scene transpires in the homosocial space of the Amazon Hotel in Esther's room (*BJ* 47). Esther's anxiety about her own sexuality is wrapped up with her attraction, and at times revulsion, toward Doreen. Does she want to be *like* Doreen, or to be *with* Doreen? Esther reflects at the start of the novel, "Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (*BJ* 7). This secret voice may be read in terms of repressed urges related to Esther's sexuality. Giving voice to her feelings of ambivalence during her time in the city, Esther thinks, "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired" (*BJ* 30). There is no room for such indecision in the era's either/or framework for social behavior. Doreen, in contrast, has no qualms about "go[ing] the whole way."

Esther struggles to place her: "I guess one of my troubles was Doreen. I'd never known a girl like Doreen before" (*BJ* 4). Early in the novel, the two go out on the town. In keeping with the novel's emphasis on masking, Esther dons an alter ego: Elly Higginbottom (*BJ* 11). Doreen and "Elly" end up at the swanky apartment of a raucous DJ, Lenny. Esther leaves the apartment when Doreen and Lenny engage in sexual foreplay, biting and wrestling; Esther's parting glimpse is of Doreen's breasts, which had "popped out of her dress and were swinging out slightly like full brown melons" (*BJ* 17). The scene is rife with biting and eating imagery, which sustains the novel's correlation between appetite, desire, and sexuality. Later that same night, a maid at the Amazon

Hotel brings an intoxicated Doreen to Esther's door. Esther discloses, "I felt if I carried Doreen across the threshold into my room and helped her onto my bed I would never get rid of her again" (*BJ* 22). In Esther's sleepy state of semi-awareness, she imagines carrying Doreen across the threshold to her bed, as a groom does his bride. Her fear that once in her bed, she "would never get rid of [Doreen] again," speaks to the utopic (im)possibility glimpsed in the homosocial space of the Amazon Hotel. The verb "rid" likewise invokes abjection, whereby Esther must expel the sexualized female other from her bed and her "self," in order to maintain her socially appropriate role, like the "sweet and friendly" intern Betsy (*BJ* 27), whom Doreen calls "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (*BJ* 6).

Esther articulates the dynamics of abjection as she is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by Doreen's sexualized presence at her door in what she describes as "a lurid third interval that had slipped between them and would never end" (*BJ* 21). As Butler observes, "If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question; within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender" ("Melancholy Gender" 136). Just as Esther is on the verge of shutting Doreen out, in a gesture of foreclosing desire—again, whether to be Doreen, or to be with Doreen—a "jet of brown vomit flew from [Doreen's] mouth and spread at a puddle at [Esther's] feet" (*BJ* 22). This abject moment registers how Doreen's sexuality alternately attracts and repels Esther and how the unbound subject undoes the era's image of the demure, sanitized (white) woman. The abject has the power to disturb boundaries between self and other, both at the literal and psychical levels, challenging that which parades itself as fixed and stable.

In response, Esther shuts the door on Doreen, and on sexual desire. “It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (*BJ* 22), she tells herself. In the morning, Esther opens the door, thinking: “I think I still expected to see Doreen’s body lying there in a pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature. There was nobody in the hall. The carpet stretched from one end of the hall to the other, clean and eternally verdant except for a faint, irregular stain before my door” (*BJ* 23). The stain invokes the structuring absence of Doreen’s body, whose irreducible materiality testifies to Esther’s “own dirty nature.” This is an overdetermined statement that refers both to Esther’s having left her friend lying passed out in a puddle of vomit, even as it refers to Esther’s longing to express her own sexuality as freely *as* Doreen, even *with* Doreen. Tracy Brain, in contrast to my reading, argues that the lesbian character “Joan is the antithesis of the 1950s femininity symbolised by Doreen, whose compliance Esther fears she will catch ‘and never get rid of’ if she allows Doreen to enter her ‘room’” (150). My reading situates Doreen’s role in the novel in the very opposite manner of compliance—Doreen is out eating hot dogs with the DJ Lenny at Coney Island, for instance, while Esther attends the *Ladies’ Day* luncheon (*BJ* 26). Esther’s encounter with abjection in the “lurid interval” of the hallway of the Amazon Hotel brings together the novel’s troping of appetite and desire, and contributes to the novel’s interest in undoing of the borders of selfhood, engaging such processes at the level of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

‘The Motherly Breath of the Suburbs’: From the Suburbs to the Asylum

Upon Esther’s nightmarish return to her mother’s home in the suburbs, it is to Doreen that Esther writes asking if she can come live with her. Significantly, though,



Esther brings the letter to her appointment with a therapist Dr. Gordon, but tears it into tiny, illegible pieces before he can read it, indicating the letter's impossible, taboo request (*BJ* 135). Esther returns home from her magazine internship carrying with her insights gleaned from her multiple, involuntary encounters with abjection—Doreen's vomiting (*BJ* 22); her own food poisoning (*BJ* 44); and her date with Marco, who attempts to rape her and throws her into the mud (*BJ* 110). When Esther arrives back home, she describes stepping from the train, where “the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded [her]” (*BJ* 113). Esther's narration makes clear that this suburban, motherly enfolding is a suffocating sensation aligned with “a summer calm that laid its soothing hand over everything, like death” (*BJ* 113). This association of the domestic with entrapment aligns (white) womanhood with death. Esther's return to the suburbs is inextricable from her history of institutionalization. Her mother takes her for treatment for depression at Dr. Gordon's private hospital in her hometown. This is a site of unbending patriarchy, as Gordon barely speaks to her before prescribing ECT. Tellingly, his only substantial comment is a derisive jab directed towards women's participation in the war effort (*BJ* 107). Following the ECT session, which is described in terms of a brutal violation, Esther observes that her watch has been placed back on her wrist, but upside down, signifying her abject position within Father's Time, the time of regulation and restriction; in response, Esther “wondered what terrible thing it was that [she] had done” (*BJ* 143). Here, ECT may be read as a punishment for her depressive behavior, even as her query signals her anguish over not having refused the shock therapy prescribed by Dr. Gordon. The treatment leads to her continued suicideation and a series of suicide attempts.

With its ironic tone and interest in the surveillance of self and others, *The Bell Jar* defamiliarizes the era's creation and celebration of the suburbs and women's supposed domestic bliss therein. As Elaine Tyler May documents in *Homeward Bound*, postwar suburban expansion grew directly out of the G.I. bill's promises to extend a college education and affordable home ownership to veterans. Such construction was even presented to the public in terms of national defense, as a decentralized, white populace with access to newly built highways was deemed to be safer from the threat of nuclear war, but also from the presence of predominantly racial and ethnic others, dwelling in densely populated urban centers (May 151). This model of sprawl and mobility uneasily recalls the contrasting specter of Japanese internment camps during the war and the subsequent, interrelated logic of the Cold War era's policy of containment as outlined in George Kennan's "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (1947). The novel absorbs this language and subtext, as Esther feels the eyes of the neighborhood's women peering *through* her bedroom walls, chastising her for her non-productivity and her inclination to spend days in bed, not bothering to groom herself (*BJ* 115). Such an account witnesses the specter of surveillance that characterizes the period and reaches a hysterical climax with McCarthyism, as well as, at the meta-level, the omnipresence of the Other, which compels us to obey social norms, even when we are alone.

Significantly, the spatiotemporal qualities of abjection are manifest in Esther's attempts to begin writing a novel upon her return home. She situates a writing table in the breezeway located between her mother's home and the neighbor's home, but struggles in vain to funnel her thoughts into writing. Her opening lines situate the novel's protagonist

as stuck in this very breezeway in her mother's nightgown "waiting for something to happen" (*BJ* 120). As Axelrod details, language becomes increasingly indecipherable and incoherent to Esther following her return to the suburbs.<sup>64</sup> Female authorship is imbricated with abject temporality, as Esther's creative labor is figured as a death struggle. It is *below* this selfsame scene of her failed writing in the breezeway where she intends to end her life in a "secret earth-bottomed crevice" of the basement, the bowels of her mother's home. She entombs herself, sealing off the entrance to the crevice with logs, then swallows the bottle of pills she has accumulated (*BJ* 169). Neither alive, nor quite dead, she is out of time in this liminal space, a key to the revelatory power of abject temporality. Her disappearance leads to a search and newspaper headlines such as "SCHOLARSHIP GIRL MISSING" (*BJ* 198)—such a detail figures Esther's suicide as unthinkable, given her status as "one of the lucky ones" (*BJ* 7).

In her discussion of the revolutionary power of experimental, polyphonic writing, Kristeva describes how "the negativizing, splitting, painful, immobilizing, and deadening drive does not stop the process: the 'I' resurfaces speaking, musicalizing, to expose the material truth of the process which had carried it to the brink of its explosion in a whirl of mute particles..." ("Polylogue" 344). Her revelatory immersion in the in-between space of life and death generates Esther's Christ-like emergence from her tomb to speak from the beyond, reentering the text as a Lady Lazarus. Upon her returns to consciousness, she is dimly aware that "someone was moaning" (*BJ* 170). This invokes her abject encounter with her own utter alterity and uncanny rapport with mortality. Esther's resurrection

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<sup>64</sup> See Steven Axelrod *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (1992).

points at the meta-level to the critic's impulse to restage Plath's own suicide attempts by way of biographical readings that compulsively rehearse the tragic circumstances of her demise. To read this episode in the novel beyond the personal imbues it with a political force that subverts the era's call for self-control and composure.

Esther's death and resurrection present her entrance into white womanhood as an agonistic struggle characterized by ambivalence, inward hostility and aggression. While convalescing in the hospital, Esther shatters the mirror with which the nurse only reluctantly furnishes her, for it reflects an unsightly, estranging image, signifying both youth and death (*BJ* 174-5). Her dropping of the mirror and her pursuant laughter at her reflection results in her being institutionalized, marking the absolute necessity in this period of recognizing a wholesome, lovely self in the mirror, not the otherness inscribed in the scabbed, bruised face of the abject depressive. This episode likewise recalls Esther's other moments of disidentification, whereby she recognizes herself in racial and ethnic others describing her own reflection as "Chinese" and "Indian" (*BJ* 18; 112), not, in other words, like that of the white women who surround her at the magazine office. The threat of being taken to the classed, abject space of the state hospital to be locked up "in a big cage in the basement" (*BJ* 160) lingers throughout her hospitalization following her suicide attempt. Significantly, however, both the city hospital—the space for those failed subjects of no means—and the suburbs, are likened to prisons, defamiliarizing the promise of the American Dream and the notion of what it means to be "free" in this era.

These institutionalized spaces are just as coded as Esther's movement through upper crust New York and the suburbs. From the city hospital, she enters a private

hospital, owing to the patronage of a female novelist Philomena Guinea (*BJ* 185), which recapitulates her status as a “scholarship girl.” There, she receives feminist psychotherapy from Dr. Nolan, insulin therapy, and electroshock therapy, and moves from the intensive therapy of the Caplan building to the more relaxed Belsize building, before reentering college. These movements, however, are not progressive, nor does she escape the unbinding force of abjection during her period of “recovery.” She takes leave from the asylum into the city, for instance, and has sex for the first time with an academic, Irwin. The incident leads to her hemorrhaging and being taken to the emergency room by Joan (*BJ* 231); Joan commits suicide shortly thereafter, hanging herself amid the trees outside the asylum (*BJ* 235). These traumas dispel the redemptive promise of a “cure,” and further critique the ubiquitous narrative of heteronormativity, which withholds a queer futural horizon from Joan.<sup>65</sup>

The novel profiles a heterogeneous group of women in the space of the asylum who respond uniquely to the shared demands of performing one’s femininity, dispelling a universal performance of femininity. *The Bell Jar*’s interest in a proliferation of selves is figured when Esther willfully smashes a box of thermometers, claiming it was an accident, then furtively snatches up a ball of mercury to hold before being put in solitary confinement. She envies the perfect ball, even as she notes how easily it can “break into a little million replicas of itself, and if [she] pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again” (*BJ* 183). This articulation of a mercurial subjectivity portrays Esther’s critique of the illusion of plenitude. She performs a million

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<sup>65</sup> In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz emphasizes a utopic horizon of futurity for queer subjects, locating its insurgent energy in queer spaces and cultural productions across time.

replicas of herself throughout the novel, some that are overtly fabricated, but none that are quite true: she is the scholarship girl (*BJ* 2); she is Buddy Willard's girlfriend; she is "Elly Higginbottom," out on the town with Doreen (*BJ* 11); she is an orphan from Chicago on a date with a sailor (*BJ* 134); she is the daughter of a Deer Island prison inmate (*BJ* 149). These selves proliferate, but unlike the character in a short story she admires about a girl sitting in the saddle of a fig tree, in view of the futural possibilities stemming from its many branches, Esther feels the intense pressure to choose just one fig (*BJ* 77). That Esther's experience is imparted in *The Bell Jar* in an episodic, non-linear fashion, rejects a progression toward an authentic selfhood, predicated on causality. When Esther leaves the institution, she thinks, "All I could see were question marks" (*BJ* 243). Such a statement foils an easy entrance into (white) womanhood, radically resisting the era's call to present oneself as stable and composed—as one whose belonging is bound up with the clear parameters of the unified nation-state. The novel's own engagement with doubt and ambiguity holds relevance for moving away from biographical readings of the novel that pin down meaning, toward interpretive play and possibility.

### Conclusion

Reading *The Bell Jar* as a posthumous novel both signed (by Sylvia Plath as Victoria Lucas) and not signed by its female author (by Ted Hughes as Sylvia Plath) unsettles the presumed correspondence between the author and his signature. In this way, Max Saunders' term "autobiografiction" is suitable for a novel like Plath's that slides

across genre, in keeping with its border-crossing thematics.<sup>66</sup> In Plath's case, unlike Ellison's, the critical obsession has been with private and domestic sphere, rather than with the work's aesthetic and social engagements, as if critics actually can and, moreover, should lay claim to every nuance of Plath's relationship with Hughes and the details of her suicide. To have the story of Plath's demise told and retold endlessly is clearly not without its ethical dimensions.

The critical impulse to dig ever deeper into the late author's past has not been lost upon Plath's daughter, Frieda.<sup>67</sup> In response to the news of the biopic *Sylvia* (2003) being made, Frieda Hughes published a poem expressing her open disgust for the biographical enterprise.<sup>68</sup> The poem, entitled, "My Mother," concludes: "Their Sylvia Suicide Doll, / Who will walk and talk / And die at will, / And die, and die / And forever be dying." The poem's title reminds of us of the intimate relationship between the lost mother and surviving daughter, and the ethical violations that biographical criticism potentially incurs by continually restaging Plath's distress and suicide. What are we reading *for* in such scenarios? Such considerations return us to Rose's insights regarding the paradoxical critical impulse to laud and denigrate Plath simultaneously. My aim has been to champion an ecstatic mode of reading that opens Plath's prose up to interpretive play, without calling the author's personal life into every textual moment as a means to decode

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<sup>66</sup> See Max Saunders *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010).

<sup>67</sup> Plath's son Nicholas, who was an infant when she died, committed suicide in 2009.

<sup>68</sup> *Sylvia*. Dir. Christine Jeffs. Perf. Gwennyth Paltrow, Daniel Craig. Focus Features, 2004. Film.

and anchor the text. In spite of an enduring strain of biographical criticism, recent scholarship has been moving toward broader engagements with the archive, focusing, for instance, on the socio-historical and political contexts that inform Plath's writings.<sup>69</sup> That Plath drew upon her life experiences in her writing is clear, but opening up the relevance of this transmutation to larger contexts is a critical task that remains to be realized. Significantly, Plath won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for her *Collected Poems* in 1982, which was, like *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971), posthumously collected, edited, and published with an Introduction by Hughes. For whom is such a prize intended? To whom is it awarded? To Plath, or some ineffable trace of Plath? To Hughes? To ourselves, as faithful readers? Such posthumous recognition suggests that we long for the immortal artist to remain among us by way of her posthumous traces as a means, perhaps, to allay our own anxieties regarding our own mortality and demise.

In the Introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Plath's posthumous collection of short stories, prose and diary excerpts, Hughes states without further elaboration that "after *The Bell Jar* [Plath] wrote 130 pages of another novel, provisionally titled *Double Exposure*. That manuscript disappeared somewhere around 1970" (1).<sup>70</sup> Scholars have long agonized over Hughes' reference to this "disappeared"

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<sup>69</sup> See Anita Helle. *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Plath's papers are housed at the Lilly Library at Indiana University at Bloomington, at the Neilson Library at Smith, and at the Woodruff Library at Emory University.



manuscript. In a letter to novelist Olive Higgins Pouty, dated November 20, 1962, Plath mentioned a “semi-autobiographical [project] about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer although she had thought he had been wonderful and perfect” (Steinberg 133 qtd. in Peel 85). The project’s provocative title, *Double Exposure*, underscores the broader idea of the irrecoverability of the stable, singular text, as well as *The Bell Jar*’s interest in multiple selves that defy a single or monological exposure.

The trope of double exposure signaled by Plath’s phantom novel’s title recalls the speaker in Plath’s poem “Medusa,” who queries: “Overexposed like an X-ray / Who do you think you are?” (*Collected Poems* 225). The speaker reveals an indignation toward the other for revealing her so, for turning her inside out. The poem ends with the line, “There is nothing between us” (226), signifying both the end of a relationship, and a closeness so intense as to leave no space between self/other, recalling the boundary crossing power of abjection. The poem enters another intertextual register when Ted Hughes weaves Plath’s very line “Over-exposed, like an X-ray—” (Hughes *Collected Poems* 1050) into his own poem “The Tender Place.” The poem was first published in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes’ collection of autobiographical poems about his relationship with Plath, released just before his death in 1998. “The Tender Place” hyphenates Plath’s “overexposed,” as “over-exposed,” emphasizing this descriptor. Such overexposure points to the self-perpetuating practice of the biographical method. We might also read in that hyphen the gap between Plath’s and Hughes’ signatures. “The Tender Place” ends

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<sup>70</sup> Though Hughes rarely gave interviews, he expressed his belief in a 1995 interview with the *Paris Review* that Aurelia Plath had taken the manuscript home with her on one of her visits.

with an address to Plath and her poetics: “And your words, / Faces reversed from the light, / Holding in their entrails” (*Collected Poems* 1051). Hughes anthropomorphizes Plath’s words, who hold in their entrails in abject fashion, struggling to cohere as that “real self” that Hughes conjures for the reader in his foreword to Plath’s posthumously abridged journals. Hughes’ allusion to Plath’s poem characterizes the impulse in Plath scholarship to dissect the author’s life, looking for those bits and pieces, those abject growths, to examine on the X-ray light box. His citation of “Medusa,” a poem that has been read biographically as being “about” Plath’s mother, generates an intertextual chain of displacement that performs the slippage of the signature, as seen in Hughes’ own highly scrutinized acts of endorsing Plath’s posthumous publications, of signing on her behalf.<sup>71</sup>

Provocatively, Hughes’ papers at Emory University contain a trunk that he requested remain sealed until 2022, or during the lifetime of his longtime spouse, Carol Hughes.<sup>72</sup> Hughes waited for the deaths of Plath’s mother Aurelia and brother Warren, before donating these papers: what does this signal in regards to our relationship to the material world following our demise? Scholars speculate that the one destroyed and the one lost journal might actually be in this trunk, as well as Plath’s disappeared second novel. The image of the trunk invokes the human mind and the manifold secrets lodged

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<sup>71</sup> Kroll reads “Medusa” as a class of jellyfish, noting that Plath’s mother’s name, Aurelia, is also a genus of jellyfish (*Chapters in a Mythology* 253).

<sup>72</sup> See Hughes’ papers: [guides.main.library.emory.edu](http://guides.main.library.emory.edu); controversy has unfolded between Carol and Frieda Hughes—the latter citing a letter Ted Hughes wrote outlining a shared division of his estate’s earnings. Carol Hughes’ spokesperson stated that this handwritten letter, “has no legal status.” See Alderson, “Dying Wish of Ted Hughes Splits Family” *The Telegraph* 27 Oct. 2002.

therein—what can and cannot be brought into the light of day, held up to the light box like so many x-rays. Will the contents of Hughes' trunk, which scholars choose to see as Plath's trunk, not inevitably disappoint critics and ensure the perpetuation of a melancholic, biographical critical enterprise in search of the elusive *objet*? The trunk emblemizes the method of containing meaning by way of the biographical method. Plath's posthumous legacy instantiates both the limits of, and the challenge to think outside of, this approach. The operation of the authorial signature and the fundamentally collaborative labor of posthumous publication take on new resonances that point us away from the personal and toward the social in my next chapter's consideration of Carson McCullers' posthumously published autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999).

### Chapter Three

The Social Subject of Life Writing in Juxtaposition with (An)other: Carson McCullers'

Posthumous Autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999)

The dead demand a double vision. A furthered zone,  
Ghostly decision of apportionment. For the dead can claim  
The lover's senses, the mortgaged heart.

—Carson McCullers "The Mortgaged Heart"

The first stanza of Carson McCullers' 1952 poem "The Mortgaged Heart" begins with an assertion: "The dead demand a double vision."<sup>73</sup> I take one meaning of this overdetermined incantation to be that we see the dead both as alive, or as they were in various moments in life, and simultaneously as dead, or gone from the material world with a finality that demands acceptance over time. The poem's second stanza meditates upon the ways in which the living honor the dead with their devotion, "experience multiplied by two" (7): the mortgaged heart, where *mortgage*, from the Old French, translates as "death pledge." The poem's final stanza concludes with an unanswerable query: "But the secluded ash, the humble bone— / Do the dead know?" (14-15). If, as Benjamin has observed, an encounter with one's own mortality is at the heart of rituals of storytelling, the posthumous text amplifies these dynamics, entering the world as it does in the wake of its author's demise. The posthumous text, inasmuch as its emergence is inextricable from the past of its writing, is always already gesturing toward a futural horizon and its ecstatic readers.

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<sup>73</sup> The posthumous collection *The Mortgaged Heart* (1971), which takes its title from and includes this poem, was edited by McCullers' sister and executor, Rita Smith. The collection includes McCullers' previously published essays, poems, short stories, as well as some juvenilia.

This chapter explores Carson McCullers' posthumously published autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999) as a work of women's life writing that is defined by its sociality, both at the level of its thematics and its material production. In poor health, McCullers dictated the autobiographical content of *Illumination and Night Glare* "to a corps of friends, family, and student secretaries" (Dews xiv) from mid-April to August 1967, in the months preceding a stroke and coma that resulted in McCullers' death at age 50 on September 29, 1967. In 1991, Carlos L. Dews, then a graduate student writing a dissertation about the figure of the mother in McCullers' fiction, came across McCullers' "unfinished" autobiography among her papers at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin. He undertook a ten-year process to gain permission from McCullers' estate to publish the work, and to find a press that was interested in the project.<sup>74</sup>

The text published in 1999 as *Illumination and Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers* opens with an Introduction by Dews, followed by the autobiographical material that McCullers dictated in 1967. This portion of the text is seventy-eight pages in length, printed in its entirety from a 128-page typescript draft that was labeled "First Draft" and entitled *Illumination and Night Glare*. The autobiography is narrated in an episodic, non-linear fashion, shifting across time and space with each new reflection. Each episode is set off by a space break that calls attention to the text's discontinuous form. This portion of the text is interspersed with archival photographs of

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<sup>74</sup> After Dews approached multiple presses, the University of Wisconsin accepted the text for its Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography Series. Dews went on to write his dissertation about the composition of McCullers' *Illumination and Night Glare*, and later to served as founding director of the Carson McCullers Center in Columbus, GA, located in McCullers' childhood home.

McCullers with her family and friends that Dews selected to accompany given passages. The second half of *Illumination and Night Glare* is comprised of an additional seventy-eight pages of selected letters exchanged between McCullers and her then ex-husband Reeves McCullers during World War II.<sup>75</sup> McCullers set in order some 300 wartime letters (Dews 84) and tied them with a string to be included in her autobiography, signaling “INSERT WAR LETTERS HERE” in the typescript (*ING* 27). As I discuss later in the chapter, Dews edited the available letters from the archive. Additionally, Dews compiled an appendix that includes a detailed chronology of McCullers’ life, as well as the outline of “The Mute”—the basis for her debut novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)—which McCullers refers to for inclusion in the opening of the autobiography.

These three related, but distinct, textual strands: McCullers’ life writing, war correspondence, and novel outline, commingle in the mode of juxtaposition, brought together by the editor’s labor and signed on her behalf. This chapter will take the concept of juxtaposition as an ecstatic reading frame wherein to consider how McCullers’ posthumous autobiography operates as a memory scrapbook that imparts meaning by way of pairing textual components at the material level, but also in terms of its thematic emphasis on sociality. As with the subject in process described in the previous chapter, these elements do not cohere as a whole in McCullers’ posthumous autobiography, but exist instead in a collaborative mode of (re)configuration. Though the estate considered publishing *Illumination and Night Glare* in the years after McCullers’ death, it was

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<sup>75</sup> Reeves and Carson McCullers divorced before the war and remarried at its end.

deemed too fragmentary and in need of editorial crafting. No one assumed the role of editor, so the material remained in the archive until Dews resurrected it and approached the estate about editing the project himself.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, Virginia Spencer Carr's 537-page, 1975 biography *The Lonely Hunter* refers only in passing to "an unfinished journal," a "book [McCullers] reportedly entitled *Illuminations [sic] and Night Glare*" (Carr 507).<sup>77</sup> Such a fleeting assessment implies that this last work was deemed a minor one, likely owing to its perceived unfinishedness. Provocatively subtitled for publication in 1999, "The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers," McCullers' posthumous text prompts us to consider the connotative power of the term "unfinished" for our reading practices, as unfinishedness is often aligned with failure—as in Ellison's case, a failure to finish.

In regards to McCullers, her life writing project came to an end with her death. The text registers what Heidegger refers to as *being towards death* (378), as McCullers' titular night glares are the result of being incapacitated by poor health; these bouts, nevertheless, vitalize and illuminate her creative practice. Facing the amputation of her leg, and no longer able to type or barely hold a pencil following a series of strokes that

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<sup>76</sup> In response to the psychic toll that editing *The Mortgaged Heart* took on her, Margarita Smith wrote to Floria Lasky, McCullers' lawyer, regarding the prospect of editing McCullers' autobiographical material into a book, that "no matter the outcome of this book [*The Mortgaged Heart*], [she] did not want to work on any other book of Carson's" (qtd. in Dews "Illumination and Night Glare" 20).

<sup>77</sup> Columbus, GA native Margaret Sullivan was also working on a McCullers biography in the 1960s and 70s, but chronic illness set her behind in her project, and Carr was the first of the two to secure a book deal. These rival biographers introduce another set of signatures to this context.

affected her left arm and hand, McCullers dictated her autobiographical meditations regarding her creative process. The act of interpellating a listener, an other in the room with her, as well as an imagined future audience, performs the autobiographical text's always already implicit solicitation of an other to recognize the writer's sufferings and triumphs. McCullers' ongoing engagement with life writing as a material and thematic social practice registers itself in imbricated (re)tellings that include: McCullers' 1954 lectures on the craft of writing with friend and fellow writer Tennessee Williams; her 1958 sessions with her analyst Dr. Mary Mercer, which were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed as writing "experiments"; McCullers' essay on writing published in *Esquire*, "The Flowering Dream" (1959); and the 1967 draft of her autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare*, which expanded upon an earlier handwritten draft entitled *Illuminations Until Now*.

In her lifetime, McCullers published three novels, one novella, and two plays—she discusses the "illumination" for each in her autobiography—as well as many essays, short stories, and poems. She achieved literary acclaim at age twenty-three with her debut novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), for which she landed her a book deal after submitting the outline for "The Mute" in 1938 to a Houghton Mifflin contest. In her autobiography, she describes pacing a rug when an illumination came to her that her novel's ensemble of characters were always speaking to John Singer, but that he never replied, because he was, in fact, a deaf mute (*ING* 3).<sup>78</sup> She went on to write the

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<sup>78</sup> Of significance to this chapter's interest in the authorial signature, the novel's title was suggested by McCullers' agent Robert Linscott, and alludes to the poem "The Lonely Hunter" (1914) by Fiona MacLeod, the pen name of Scottish poet William Sharp.



controversial *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) in just two months, detailing military life and closeted homosexual desire on a Georgia military base.<sup>79</sup> While struggling during the war years with the composition of her next project *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers turned her focus to a novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1943), inspired by a couple she saw at a bar in Brooklyn (*ING* 32); the text ponders the unlikely love story of a giantess bootlegger, who falls in love with a hunchback.<sup>80</sup> She then returned to *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), which traces young Frankie Addams overdetermined entrance into white womanhood, completing the novel, then adapting it for the stage. The play, starring Ethel Waters and Julie Harris, was a Broadway hit in 1950; this success, however, was followed by her commercially unsuccessful play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957), and her final, under-theorized novel *Clock Without Hands* (1961), about the deadly aftermath of court-ordered desegregation in a small Georgia town. This chapter focuses primarily on McCullers' social practice of life writing and her posthumous autobiography, but later in the chapter, I consider her fiction's investment in alternative social formations in a reading of *The Member of the Wedding*.

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Though McCullers initially had reservations about the title, she ultimately consented to the change (Carr 540).

<sup>79</sup> The film adaptation of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) starred Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor and was directed by John Huston, who became a dear friend of McCullers'.

<sup>80</sup> *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* was adapted for the stage by Edward Albee in 1963, in consultation with McCullers' and with her blessing. The novella itself contains almost no dialogue; in another instance of a collaborative signature, in an interview, Albee described himself as taking on McCullers' voice to generate the dialogue.

*Illumination and Night Glare*, like my previous discussions of Ellison's and Plath's work, demonstrates how, in the end, (an)other signs our signature. Unlike John Callahan's and Ted Hughes' respective relationships with Ellison and Plath, in this instance, the posthumous editor Carlos Dews never knew McCullers, but rather is a researcher and admirer of her fiction who resurrects the "unfinished" autobiography as one worthy of circulation for its elucidating relationship to her author function. Dews has written self-reflexively about growing up as a queer youth in working-class East Texas and the affinity he felt with McCullers' fiction.<sup>81</sup> The double operation of the signature resides both in Dews' signing of the text on McCullers' behalf over thirty years after its dictated composition, and in the text itself, as the author's signature operates by way of metonymy, complicating McCullers' relation to her proper name, as it relates to her late husband Reeves McCullers.

Dews' archival and editorial labor demonstrates the function of what Derrida terms the *supplement*, or that which augments, but is never fully integrated into a totality.<sup>82</sup> Dews supplements McCullers' autobiography with archival photographs, letters, and exposition. The initial material dictated by McCullers decades earlier enters into new ecstatic contexts with the addition of these archival materials. This juxtapositional work of life writing lends new possibilities for ecstatic reading by

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<sup>81</sup> See *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*. Eds. Carlos Dews and Carolyn Leste Law. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995. Print. Of significance to this chapter's interest in the shared signature, Dews went on to become a fiction writer of a series of thrillers co-written with S.J. Rozan, and published under the shared pseudonym Sam Cabot.

<sup>82</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology* 144

resisting finishedness. McCullers' life writing, in conversation with Ellison's unbound novel, is an exemplar of the unbound text—or that which exceeds normative expectations for closure and continuity, and like Plath's, resists monological reading practices that rely upon biographical factors and stated or implied artistic intentions. *Illumination and Night Glare* invites our active meaning-making with its emphasis on the social fabric or scrapbook of existence.

*Illumination and Night Glare* is a work of women's autobiography that emphasizes a heterogeneous sociality. This privileging of the social eschews the solitary "I" of traditional autobiography for a boisterous *we*, or what Frankie Addams calls the "we of me" (42) in *The Member of the Wedding*. With its non-linear structure and oral quality, McCullers' life writing revises traditional autobiography's demands for chronology, teleological growth and truth-telling. She aligns life's illuminations with creative production, and night glare with the inability to write or create (*ING* 36-38), but these two states are inextricable. In sharing her moments of jubilation and despair, she invites the reader's dialogical engagement, or "double vision." Such a doubleness registers this posthumous text's temporally excessive thematics, delivered by way of dictation, and its structure, which zigzags across time and space. By temporally excessive, I refer again to the theory of human experience as inherently temporal and the manner in which our private sense of temporality continually exceeds and eludes chronological ordering. McCullers' text follows the associative wanderings of memory, as each episode contributes to a narrative that remains in flux, "unfinished" at the time of McCullers' death, and irreducible to a whole.

McCullers' collaboratively-crafted autobiography puts pressure on the autonomous Enlightenment "I" of traditional life writing. Early autobiography studies scholars like Georges Gusdorf regarded autobiography as the domain in which "the curiosity of the individual about himself, the wonder that he feels before the mystery of his own destiny, is thus tied to the Copernican Revolution: at the moment it enters into history, humanity, [...] finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure" (31). The emphasis here is on the Cartesian individual—who is implicitly white, propertied, heterosexual, and male—and his teleological development. McCullers' life writing project radically resists this formulation of the proper subject and his autonomous adventure with its emphasis on the dialogical constitution of experience. Feminist autobiography studies theorists such as Leigh Gilmore and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson advocate that distancing ourselves from the illusion of autonomy, authenticity, and "truth" in life writing proliferates rather than forecloses meaning. Such theorizations underscore McCullers' exuberant work of life writing as a text that embraces excess and ambivalence. McCullers demonstrates a self-reflexive awareness of her own inconsistencies of memory in her autobiography, at times overtly stating that she does not fully remember the details surrounding an event (*ING* 40); in turn, the text avoids the confessional logics of traditional autobiography, and playfully violates Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," which implicitly frames autobiography in a juridical context with its demands for veracity and accuracy.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, McCullers' experience

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<sup>83</sup> See LeJeune. "The Autobiographical Pact." Lejeune coined this phrase to insist on the reader's ability to trust that the writer is telling him the truth. Such a formulation, however, posits the presence of Truth and situates life writing in a confessional context.

is deeply invested in the social fabric of experience; her literal and symbolic moves between South and North, the US and Europe, sickness and health, adulthood and childhood, male and female companionship, showcase the ecstatic qualities of temporality.

To date, *Illumination and Night Glare* has received scant scholarly attention.<sup>84</sup>

The reception of McCullers' posthumous text by reviewers upon its initial release was mixed and its engagement by scholars rather spare, ostensibly because of its being perceived as unfinished. Upon its publication in 1999, a *New York Times* review summed up the divided reactions: "A reviewer in *The New Criterion* said that 'Illumination and Night Glare' served no purpose and 'tells us nothing new about this most bizarre of characters.' In contrast, *The London Times Literary Supplement* said it was 'a rich mine of information for anyone interested in McCullers and American literary life in the 1950's'" (Gussow).<sup>85</sup> Such contrasting assessments raise the question: what "purpose," to use critic Brooke Allen's term in *The New Criterion*, should an autobiographical text "serve"? Should an autobiographical text function as an exposé, revealing intimate information about the author's private life? Allen seems to think so. In her caustic review,

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<sup>84</sup> An MLA bibliographic search yields one essay by Mary Gervin, "Illumination and Night Glare: Carson McCullers's Sad Songs of the South," in an edited collection that I was unable to find. It is unclear whether this essay is about the autobiography, or just borrows from its title. (Web 6 Mar 2015): in *Conflict in Southern Writing*. Eds. Ben P. Robertson, and Richard Scott Nokes. Troy, AL: Association for Textual Study and Production, 2006. 133-145. Print.

<sup>85</sup> Another review asserts that "it will not enhance the reputation of one of midcentury America's 'wonder children.' Her family would have done her and her admirers a service in letting this incomplete, disordered manuscript remain unpublished" (376). See Brown, John. L. Rev. of "Illumination and Night Glare." *World Literature Today* 74.2 (2000).

“Emotional Vampire,” Allen laments that “more than thirty years after McCullers’s death, the University of Wisconsin Press has decided to dust off the aborted embryo, [and] pad it out” with archival materials. This charged and gendered metaphor captures the aesthetic judgment often leveled against posthumously published work—the bastard to the author’s legitimate progeny, as in the case of Ellison’s unbound novel. In contrast, however, to Ellison’s posthumously-edited novel *Juneteenth* being called a “Frankenstein’s monster,” stitched together by Callahan, this critic faults McCullers as the failed mother, the “Emotional Vampire” of the review’s title, for not including explicit personal information regarding her relationships.<sup>86</sup>

The author function affords Allen the illusion of an intimate knowledge of the late writer, as though the reviewer is actually privy to the truth that McCullers fails to disclose. McCullers, it seems, has violated the autobiographical pact. Allen concludes, “*Illumination & Night Glare* does, unfortunately, make McCullers look more angelic than she was, and it would be a pity if unwary readers took her at her own valuation of herself.” Such cautionary language assigns a devious intentionality to McCullers’ recollections and casts the reader as naïve. I cite Allen’s review in detail because it is indicative of many of the entrenched attitudes toward life writing that feminist autobiographical scholars such as Gilmore, and Smith and Watson, have worked to disrupt: namely, juridical demands for veracity and truth-telling, and an allegiance to a Cartesian model of selfhood predicated upon a model of the abstract citizen. McCullers’ collaborative life writing practice, like Plath’s autobiografiction, contributes to the work

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<sup>86</sup> See Louis Menand’s *NY Times* review of *Juneteenth* (20 Jun 1999)

of severing the strict correspondence between the author and her signature. This moves us away from the Romantic “great authors” paradigm, and toward a model of writing as an inherently social practice.

As McCullers’ title signals, the emotional states of illumination and night glare that she sets out to articulate dance with the unsayable, or that which escapes language, even as it demands a telling. Such ecstatic states of being outside of oneself do not conform to a model of writing bound up with the Enlightenment project of Truth. McCullers tends instead in the generative direction of elaboration and embellishment (Dews xviii). Her project exceeds traditional autobiography’s generic conventions of didacticism and edification, as demonstrated in such canonical texts as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. McCullers’ autobiography invites the reader into the text without the promise of the teleological development, moral instruction, or resolution associated with autobiography’s generic conventions and the formation of the bourgeois subject at large that traditional biographical criticism implicitly seeks to resurrect by way of the posthumous text.

The problematic framework immured in the logic of father’s time—the time of reason, bourgeois efficiency, and heteronormative citizenship—raises the need for a feminist poststructuralist approach to thinking through the overdetermined temporal, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of posthumous publications—as my first two chapters demonstrate—and, in McCullers’ case, of posthumously published life writing, in particular. What new meanings might emerge when, as Gilmore advocates, we loosen the strictures of genre and gender (204)? In a 1967 *New York Times* interview with Rex

Reed, McCullers described the project of *Illumination and Night Glare* in these terms: “I think it is important for future generations of students to know why I did certain things, but it is also important for myself.” Here, McCullers blends the professional with the personal, collapsing the arbitrary distinction between public and private that have conventionally aligned women’s writing with the latter, as Plath’s posthumous legacy demonstrates. She also signals a self-reflexive awareness of the genre—McCullers was an avid reader of biographies (Carr 27)—and of her own author function, as objects of study. Rather than viewing McCullers’ autobiography as a “key” to understanding and unlocking her *oeuvre*, I read it as an ecstatic text that operates in the mode of juxtaposition; it is in dialogue with her fiction, but irreducible to it. In this way, reading *Illumination and Night Glare* as a work of women’s autobiography affirms its elliptical and non-chronological telling, which is amplified by its posthumous supplementation, publication, and circulation, decades after its dictation to others. Again, the goal of such a reconfiguration is to loosen our entrenched attitudes toward the author as originator, thereby welcoming her “friendly return,” as I will discuss later in the chapter by way of Barthes’ theorization of the *biographeme*.

#### ‘Our Flowering Dream’: McCullers and Mercer’s Dictaphone ‘Experiments’

McCullers’ *Illumination and Night Glare* bears an irreducible relationship to the life writing she generated while in treatment with Dr. Mary Mercer in the Spring of 1958. McCullers was referred to Mercer while she was suffering from depression and writer’s block in the face of myriad health issues and multiple operations on her left arm and



hand, and in the wake of Reeves McCullers' suicide in 1953, and the death of her mother in 1955. Compounding these losses was the commercial failure of her Broadway play *The Square Root of Wonderful* in 1957. Determined to write in spite of great physical and emotional turmoil, McCullers began using a dictaphone; she and Dr. Mercer referred to the recordings and transcriptions of their sessions as "experiments." The pair would read over the transcriptions to cull material for further analysis and for McCullers' writing projects, both fiction, her final novel *Clock Without Hands* (1961), and her planned autobiography.<sup>87</sup> Though Mercer saw McCullers for a year, there are a total of nine experiments—ranging between one to seventeen pages each, and dated between April 4, 1958 and May 16, 1958—available in the Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection housed at Columbus State University, not far from McCullers' childhood home in Columbus, Georgia. The two became lifelong friends after concluding therapy, spending considerable time together and continually expressing their love for one another in written correspondence.

These dictaphone sessions raise several ethical questions about how to approach and write about material that is at once both private and public. My own investment is in contemplating the literary value of these experiments in the mode of life writing and their

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<sup>87</sup> Biographer Josyane Savigneau documents McCullers' 1963 correspondence with friend and biographer Oliver Evans, who published *The Ballad of Carson McCullers* (1966), in which McCullers describes a "book of memories" she intends to write, entitled *The Flowering Dream* (313). Though McCullers did publish an essay about writing for *Esquire* by the same name, "The Flowering Dream" (1959), *Illumination and Night Glare* ostensibly is the memory text she envisioned and that takes shape in the months before her death. McCullers also published many autobiographical essays in the 1950s and 60s that are collected in *The Mortgaged Heart* (1971).

ecstatic rapport with McCullers' autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare*. My aim is not to present biographical evidence, or "secrets," selected from the sessions to explain McCullers' fiction as being in direct correspondence with her life experiences or her stated intentions. In the first experiment, McCullers herself notes the paradoxical nature of the recordings and troubles the distinction between private and public, telling Mercer, "IT CERTAINLY WOULD CRAMP A PATIENT'S STYLE IF THEY THOUGHT YOU WERE PLAYING IT BACK TO OTHER PEOPLE.....I DON'T MIND.....IT IS NOT A SECRET AT ALL, .....IT IS A SECRET AND NOT A SECRET, BOTH" (Experiment 1 Page 1).<sup>88</sup>

Significantly, McCullers addresses Dr. Mercer in the sessions as her interlocuter, calling the dictaphone sessions "letters between them" (Experiment 1 Page 3), and "our book....Our Flowering Dream" (Experiment 2 Page 4). McCullers shares with Mercer that she showed the beginning of one of these "letters" to her best friend Tennessee Williams, telling him, "it was a kind of encyclopedia of suffering, you know, and he asked how many volumes it was going to be" (Experiment 2 Page 2). Such an interpellation underscores the dialogic and limitless nature of this therapeutic model of working through, as well as McCullers' consistent appeal to sardonic humor as a means of survivance. The experiments, what McCullers calls "an impromptu journal of [her] heart" (Experiment 1 Page 2), emerge in the manner of a stream of consciousness, with

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<sup>88</sup> The dictaphone transcripts are typed in all caps; after this first quotation, however, I have reverted back to standard typing when quoting from the experiments, but I have preserved the original number and placement of ellipses as they appear in the transcripts, which were meant to signal McCullers' pauses. I refer to the transcripts by experiment number and page number, all of which are found in Box 1 Series 5 of the Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection.

few clear prompts from Mercer or transitions from McCullers. McCullers recites, for instance, poems she had recorded and published in the period, like “Saraband”—which she cites Baudelaire’s posthumously published collection of fragments *Mon Coeur Mis à Nu* (1885) as having inspired—and “Stone is Not Stone,” alongside references to the impact of texts like Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” on her writing.<sup>89</sup> This associative pastiche situates writing at the heart of her life experience and as always already intertextual.

If the phenomenology of writing heretofore had been about the holding of a pencil, and the typing of keys, McCullers reorients her writing practice with the dictaphone, ever aware of its materiality, which is never quite naturalized—“It is like a maniac taxi going on and on,” she says of the sound it produces (Experiment 2 Page 4). The dictaphone, nevertheless, becomes a vital extension, a prosthetic whereby the voice takes precedence over the hand(s) to facilitate the act of writing. The experiments begin with a parenthetical: “(It has to be held close like this)”; there are also often insertions of “end of reel,” and so on, embedded within the text, that generate a grammar whereby to read these transcripts in McCullers and Mercer’s absence. Holding the dictaphone close recalls McCullers’ metaphor of a journal of the heart, even as it signals what I would describe as the textual intimacy of these transcripts, which are at once both private and public, secret and not secret, as McCullers notes. The dialogics of the sessions are brought to a meta-level throughout the transcripts; for instance, at one point in the third experiment, McCullers interjects, “I think we won’t [sic] make any sense if we don’t [sic]

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<sup>89</sup> “Saraband” was recorded for MGM; “Stone is not Stone” appeared in *Mademoiselle* Jul. 1957; both appear in *The Mortgaged Heart* (1971).

have what you say too. Can you remember what you were saying?” (Experiment 3 Page 5). This reference to making sense raises the questions: to whom? the transcriber? each other? to future readers?

Likely, this polysemic statement was made in reference to a book project that McCullers had in mind. In the first session, McCullers rehearses with Dr. Mercer anecdotes with clever punch lines, then alludes to a book deal: “If I am going to get an advance from my publisher...I have to have some kind of...humor and fun...or else he will never give me an advance” (Experiment 1 Page 3). Later in the first session, she revises this statement, calling attention to the narrativizing practices in these transcripts: “about the humor thing cut that ... and get back to our flowering dream” (Experiment 1 Page 4). This oscillation between public and private, humor and the dream, not secret and secret, pervades the material. McCullers consistently emphasizes the “we of me,” or the “our” of “our flowering dream,” which fuels the creative spirit, or “illumination” of her autobiography, what she calls “livingness” in her final novel (*Clock* 115).

Compellingly, the collaborative nature of these sessions is manifest is the frequent absence of punctuation in the transcripts, so that Dr. Mercer’s interjections and meditations about childhood development and experience, for instance, commingle with McCullers’ own memories and narratives.<sup>90</sup> Among the archival materials grouped with these sessions is a handwritten note signed “Barbara,” ostensibly the transcriber; she writes: “Dr. Mercer, This was a lovely experiment, and I enjoyed it once I got into it—I am getting used to her manner of speech, and I think it will go faster from now on—If

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<sup>90</sup> See, for instance, Experiment 7, (Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection (MC 296), Experiment 7, 5 May 1958 in Box 1 Series 5 Folder 5A.7 (b)).

you wish more punctuation? (quotes around person's remarks, etc.) let me know—I left this as rough as it came out, as you'll see... Barbara."<sup>91</sup> Barbara experiences pleasure in the material practice of interpreting and transcribing McCullers' speech patterns and Mercer's remarks. This is not an immediate or mimetic translation—"it will go faster from now on"—but rather the product of shared labor and reflection. Mercer's and Barbara's signatures, among the other transcribers', are in ecstatic rapport with McCullers', unsettling the unified "I" of traditional life writing.

Against the didactic function of conventional autobiography, McCullers' often privileges the comic and the *outré* in the experiments. Before her impulse to cut that "humor thing," she remarks, "So this leads to humor, which is a fine...a nice way to go on for this is getting very serious" (Experiment 1 Page 3). In turn, in the first "experiment," McCullers recalls spending nights at Gypsy Rose Lee's house, where Gypsy had regular nighttime trysts with a man who always arrived with an entourage of bodyguards; it eventually dawned on McCullers that her friend's lover was Waxy Gordon, a notorious gangster.<sup>92</sup> The same anecdote about Gypsy and Waxy Gordon is narrated in 1967 for *Illumination and Night Glare* (33); just as in the dictaphone sessions,

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<sup>91</sup> See Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection (MC 296) Box 11 Folder 5-A.1(b)

<sup>92</sup> McCullers was close friends with Gypsy Rose Lee, a burlesque performer, actress, and pulp novelist; Gypsy lived with McCullers in what was known as February House in Brooklyn Heights, along with editor George Davis, W.H. Auden, Richard and Elaine Wright, Christopher Isherwood and many others. McCullers moved into the house after her initial separation from Reeves McCullers. For a full account of this artistic community, see Sherill Tippens. *February House: The Story of W.H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Jane and Paul Bowles, Benjamin Britten, and Gypsy Rose Lee, Under One Roof in Brooklyn* (2006).

in her autobiography, McCullers frequently turns to the comic for insight and relief. In *Illumination and Night Glare*, McCullers recalls her therapy with Dr. Mercer as “the happiest and most rewarding experience of [her] life” (ING 52). She describes telling Mercer all manner of “silly things” (ING 76), like Gypsy’s gift to McCullers of her monkey, Herman. Herman returned the favor by latching onto McCullers’ hair and biting her head. Gypsy is also with McCullers when the latter experiences her illumination about *The Member of the Wedding* that “Frankie is in love with the bride of her brother and wants to join the wedding” (ING 32). This insight flashes in McCullers’ mind after the two friends were running in the street, chasing the sound of a fire engine. These ecstatic recollections perform the feminist autobiographical function of recognition and collaborative sociality that infuses the dictaphone sessions.

The tension between the public and private content of these transcripts, however, emerges in the wake of McCullers’ death in 1967. McCullers’ agent Robbie Lantz wrote to Dr. Mercer in 1970, as the estate was assessing McCullers’ papers for publication possibilities before sending them to the Harry Ransom Center. In the letter, he asks Mercer about an autobiographical manuscript that he had read at McCullers’ request when she was in the hospital in 1958, taking the draft home with him overnight. He recalls, in particular, reading a lively anecdote about Gypsy Rose Lee’s involvement with gangsters. Mercer responds that “that material which [he] read was not a manuscript but part of Carson’s psychiatric record. Carson was in psychiatric treatment with me for one year. That particular hospitalization must have occurred while she was still my patient. Her psychiatric records, like those of any other psychiatric patient, are strictly

confidential.”<sup>93</sup> In the same letter, Mercer alludes to Floria Lasky, McCullers’ friend and longtime lawyer and co-executor, asking Mercer about a manuscript entitled, “The Flowering Dream.” Mercer maintains that while McCullers published an essay by that title in *Esquire*, the manuscript in question is not a manuscript, at all, but McCullers’ psychiatric record, and not material for publication. Mercer acknowledges in another letter drafted in March 1970, that she apparently did not ever send to Robbie Lantz, that McCullers proposed recording the sessions so “that a book could be published someday to support the therapy. It was her idea of killing two birds with one stone.” Mercer goes on to maintain that their sessions “were used up by Carson in her own way” when she composed her autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare*, but that the transcripts themselves were not cited, nor intended for publication.<sup>94</sup>

Though McCullers collapses the distinction between public and private, not secret and secret, during the actual sessions, it was over the course of many decades that Dr. Mercer came to revise her view of the dictaphone experiments as confidential. Upon her passing in 2011 at the age of 101, Mercer gifted the dictaphone sessions, or what very likely are excerpts from the transcripts, to the archive at Columbus State University.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See Box 13 Folder 6-B.1 19 These materials are in contrast to what Mercer refers to as “Carson’s autobiography,” the draft manuscript of *Illumination and Night Glare*, regarding which in a letter to Lantz written on November 9, 1967, not long after McCullers’ death, Mercer shares that rereading this text was “uncanny” and that “it truly comforted [her]” (Box 13 Folder 6-B.1 11).

<sup>94</sup> See Box 13 Folder 6-C 4.10

<sup>95</sup> There is no 4<sup>th</sup> Experiment included with the sessions. It may have been lost or removed by Mercer. Another instance is that the 7<sup>th</sup> Experiment ends abruptly with an incomplete sentence.

Mercer's papers are a compelling instance of the active selectivity that goes into the making of an archive. The posthumous archive, like the posthumous text, emblemizes the ecstatic nature of deferral and displacement in and through time. Notably, Mercer created a handwritten inventory that she maintained through the decades, which was largely preserved in the creation of the Columbus State University archive's formal finding aid. Though many of McCullers' papers went to the Harry Ransom Center in the early 1970s, Mercer created her own archive, cataloguing in pen and pencil on lined paper her correspondences with McCullers, with McCullers scholars, and with McCullers' estate, to which Mercer was appointed, along with McCullers' agent, lawyer, and sister. She also collected articles related to McCullers, and mementos gathered during their years of companionship. Mercer's labor as archivist extends to her purchase of McCullers' house in Nyack, NY, whose units she rented out to artists in order to preserve it as a cultural landmark.

Mercer's personal and professional rapport with McCullers recall Leigh Gilmore's theorization of the "shared signature" of lesbian autobiography (204). In her analysis of Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), wherein Stein masquerades as her life partner Alice B. Toklas to narrate the fabric of their life lived together, Gilmore details how the shared female signature undermines the Cartesian signature of traditional masculinist autobiography. This conception is useful for considering these dictaphone sessions and their impact upon McCullers' final texts, as well as on Mercer's own writing. Mercer wrote a book after McCullers' passing, entitled *Speak My Name, Remember My Face: A Portrait of Carson McCullers* (1973),



commemorating her years with McCullers.<sup>96</sup> She wrote the text in both prose and poetry. Mercer's papers include correspondence detailing her unsuccessful attempts to have the project published, which is similar in style to Gertrude Stein's experimental portrait of Alice B. Toklas, "Ada." Mercer writes in the prose version's opening:

Each one would say, then, pausing, hoping she would be saying, then, saying himself again to her listening so very, very well. So and then, gradually, each one, hearing his own saying, would be lulled into beginning to say to her his own secret, inner self-sayings. Each one. This is why each one knew her best. Only happy hours.

This representative passage evokes the dialogic nature of narrativizing that gives voice to our craving for recognition from (an)other. That this other is exceptional—a celebrated author—heightens the desire to hear and be heard. Publishers informed Mercer that a more explicit, straightforward biography of McCullers would find a market, but not Mercer's abstract, poetic telling of their rapport and time spent together, relying as it does upon a structure of gerunds and repetition. Nevertheless, Dr. Mercer's attempts to sublimate her experiences with McCullers into writing, housed as it is in an archival collection that is named for both women, adds another poignant layer to the shared signature of women's life writing.

The dictaphone experiments were generative for both McCullers' final novel *Clock Without Hands* and her autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare*.<sup>97</sup> The

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<sup>96</sup> See The Dr. Mary E. Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection (MC 296) Box 24 Folder 7-P.0. Mercer practiced child psychiatry and published *The Art of Becoming Human*.

dedication of McCullers' final novel reads, "For Dr. Mary E. Mercer." The typescript copy of the novel with which McCullers gifted Mercer, and which is among Mercer's papers, bears the additional inscription, written in pen and in barely legible handwriting, "with all my / gratitude and love / Carson."<sup>98</sup> The difficulty of reading the cramped handwriting makes visible McCullers' psychic process of working through in the dictaphone sessions; as analysand, McCullers narrativizes her life experiences—expressing throughout her gratitude to Mercer—in the mode of a reckoning, not with the aim of resolution *per se*, but toward continued creation.

Of deep significance to these sessions is the fact that McCullers recounts her feelings of unrequited love for lesbian Swiss author and heiress Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach in at least half of the transcripts, elaborating the effects of the shared signature of lesbian autobiography. Central to these meditations are McCullers' feelings of despair over Schwarzenbach's morphine addiction and withdrawals, her suicide attempts, and her subsequent commitment to Bellevue—traumatic events at which McCullers was present. Appearing before a judge, Schwarzenbach opted for deportation, rather than continued institutionalization. McCullers recalls in these sessions that while writing *The Member of the Wedding*, she was desperately trying to get an assignment as a correspondent overseas either to join Schwarzenbach in Lisbon as she awaited a passport to join DeGaulle's resistance forces in the Congo, or to join her ex-husband Reeves, who had been injured in the War and was convalescing in England (Experiment 8 Page 6).

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<sup>97</sup> McCullers worked on *Clock Without Hands* over a ten-year period, beginning in 1951. She published excerpts in *Botteghe Oscure* and in *Mademoiselle* in 1953.

<sup>98</sup> See Dr. Mary Mercer/Carson McCullers Collection (MC 296) Box 3 Folder 1-F

I include this biographical content not to forge a strict correspondence between it and triangulated love in McCullers' fiction—many critics have duly noted such triangles in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and *The Member of the Wedding*, for instance—but rather to acknowledge McCullers' privileging of queer belonging and non-heteronormative affinities in her life writing and in her fiction.<sup>99</sup> In reference to McCullers' relationships with Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Reeves McCullers, Mercer responds, "Sometimes I wonder how you can live ... your life has been given to these death-driven people. And in your way, you have tried to follow them," to which McCullers revises, "I don't think that is true quite. In my own way, I have tried to resurrect them" (Experiment 5 page 4). In this attitude, McCullers gathers a vitality that is bound up with the pleasure principle.<sup>100</sup>

The impulse toward resurrection takes on added force in the mode of life writing, in a manner more akin to Plath's *Lady Lazarus* and Esther Greenwood, than the metaphorical resurrections of Ellison's *Bliss*, or, as the next chapter will explore, Demby's *King Comus*. McCullers marries Reeves McCullers twice. When he presents her with two nooses in France, an invitation to a double suicide, she does not follow him into death, as Mercer intimates, but chooses life, returning to the US in 1953 with the clothes on her back. Reeves' spectral presence haunts these sessions with its absence—he

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<sup>99</sup> This claim is informed by Elizabeth Freeman's work in McCullers' scholarship and Jose Muñoz's work on queer communities at large, which both insist on alternative modes of being.

<sup>100</sup> In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919), Freud's post-World War I publication on repetition compulsion, he advances the surprising thesis that there is a kind of pleasure in repeatedly experiencing unpleasure.

is mentioned rarely in the archived dictaphone sessions, but much more frequently in *Illumination and Night Glare*. In the autobiography, in fact, McCullers refers specifically to discussing her “relations with Reeves” with Dr. Mercer (*ING* 76; 78), explaining how “from being a man of glory, he descended little by little to forgery, theft, and attempted murder” (*ING* 76)—these discussions, however, are not to be found in the archived dictaphone sessions. Conversely, McCullers’ attachment to Annemarie Schwarzenbach pervades McCullers’ work in therapy, but forms a structuring absence in *Illumination and Night Glare*—in which Schwarzenbach is mentioned multiple times, but not to the extent and with the candor with which McCullers’ addresses her love and desire for her in the dictaphone experiments. The nested temporalities of these experiences give voice to the force of longing and loss in McCullers’ autobiographical accounts and her fiction. McCullers performs these rhetorical resurrections that she may live on, albeit with a mortgaged heart.

Following these 1958 experiments, McCullers published “The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing” as an essay in the deluxe 1959 Christmas Jubilee Issue of *Esquire*, which came packaged in a metallic gold envelope, and featured new writing by literary luminaries including: William Faulkner, Arthur Miller, Dorothy Parker, and George Bernard Shaw. Notably the title “Our Flowering Dream” of the dictaphone sessions is absorbed into the “*The*” of the published essay, “The Flowering Dream,” as a constitutive feature, so that “our dream” is “*the* dream.”<sup>101</sup> To this end, the essay concludes: “Writing in essence, is communication; and communication is the only access to love—to love, to

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<sup>101</sup> “The Flowering Dream” (1959) was reprinted posthumously in *The Mortgaged Heart* (1971).

conscience, to nature, to God, and to the dream. For myself, the further I go into my own work and the more I read of those I love, the more aware I am of the dream and the logic of God, which indeed is a Divine collusion.” McCullers shares similar, almost verbatim sentiments in the first dictaphone session with Dr. Mercer, musing, “the further I went into my own work, the longer I live with the work I love, the more I was aware of the dream and the logical [sic] God” (Experiment 1, page 1). This divine collusion speaks to the shared signature’s alternative sociality and to writing itself as an inherently social practice.

#### The Signature: Dialogic Sociality in *Illumination and Night Glare*

Reeves and Carson McCullers’ complex relationship is part of the larger historical narrative of WWII, even as their personal history is at odds with normative conceptions of the procreative nuclear family following the Good War. We witness an agonistic struggle for recognition in *Illumination and Night Glare* throughout McCullers’ description of her relationship with Reeves McCullers, whom McCullers married, divorced, remarried, and then separated from just prior to his suicide in 1953. Critics such as Jan Whitt read these moves as evidence of McCullers’ conflicted sexual orientation.<sup>102</sup> My own focus is not to categorize McCullers’ sexuality, but rather to emphasize the defamiliarization of heteronormative institutions in McCullers’ life writing and fiction, which puts added pressure on the logic of abstract citizenship. The authorial signature, as

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<sup>102</sup> See Whitt’s Introduction and essay in *Reflections in a Critical Eye: Essays on Carson McCullers*. Lanham, Maryland: UP of America, 2008. Print.

figured by the surname McCullers, emerges therefore as an overdetermined motif in McCullers' experience as both wife and artist. As discussed in the previous chapter in the context of Sylvia Plath's posthumous legacy, in our physical absence, the signature stands in for our presence and our consent. How might Gilmore's notion of the shared signature of lesbian autobiography, or Gayatri Spivak's interest in reclaiming the *matronymic* be of use to reading McCullers' life writing and posthumous autobiography, and her provocative claim that "everything in my fiction has happened to me, or will in the future"?<sup>103</sup>

McCullers points to the shock of discovering that Reeves McCullers had forged her personal checks, overdrawing her account, as the incident that led to their divorce in 1940 (*ING* 30). With her status as celebrated author, she inhabits their surname, standing in as the era's proverbial breadwinner. Subsequently, when their divorce proceedings concluded, McCullers found herself unable to sign her married name to the traveler's checks that she had had issued, and required a friend to guide her pen clumsily along the paper (Carr 184-5). This defamiliarizing encounter with her name invokes both McCullers' emotional duress, and evokes her later reliance upon (an)other, first by dictation, then posthumously, to sign her writing on her behalf. Here, McCullers is estranged from her married name, and so from the act of signing—an act which is meant to endorse her physical presence and consent. Also striking here is the act and concept of withdrawal. Rather than shoring up the autonomous "I" of life writing, she requires an

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<sup>103</sup> See Gayatri Spivak. "Displacement and the Discourse of Women." Ed. Mark Krupnik. *Displacement: Derrida and After*. Bloomington, ID: Indiana UP, 1983. 169-195. Print.

other, a friend, to trace her name, the sign of her former union with Reeves, from which she is forging a critical distance. She loses her composure, unable to sign for her “self.” McCullers presents us with the “unjoined” (*Member 3*), ecstatic subject, who often finds herself unmoored.

It is by way of their wartime correspondence that Reeves and Carson are reconciled and remarried after the war. The collected letters in *Illumination and Night Glare* rehearse compelling spatio-temporal asymmetries, owing to the fact that their letters would often arrive out of chronological order, or in a bunch, which manifests temporal density and simultaneity, as well as an elliptical rapport that characterizes the experience of love and connection during wartime. Reeves, like many other soldiers, was required to burn his letters, so as not to have them on his body if he were killed (*ING* 81). Elizabeth Freeman observes in her discussion of McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding*, how the novel’s original title, *The Bride*, “registers the new centrality, in the 1940s, of the bride as a national icon; at the time McCullers was writing, the national wedding industry had taken off, early marriage had begun to replace ‘promiscuous’ dating among adolescents in the United States, and U.S. ‘war brides’ who married quickly before sending their husbands off to fight were seen as exemplary patriots” (46). Such attitudes are registered but also defamiliarized in these letters, as the two are, in fact, divorced at the time. McCullers espouses deep pride over Reeves’ bravery on the frontlines, while also wishing that his injuries will keep him out of the war and safe from further harm. She experiences paralyzing concern for his well-being: often describing her partial loss of vision when she attempts to read his letters and telegrams, fearing their

contents. The intensity of these experiences and the sentiments disclosed in these writings culminates in their reunion and remarrying following the war, though their relationship is hardly normative, nor stable in its second iteration.

In the process of dictating *Illumination and Night Glare*, McCullers indicated in all caps “(INSERT WAR LETTERS)” (ING 27): not being able to deduce just which of the 300 letters McCullers had gathered were intended for inclusion in the autobiography—though perhaps she wanted all of them included—Dews culled some eighty pages worth of their wartime correspondence from the Ransom Center.<sup>104</sup> Here, Dews stands in as an ecstatic collaborator who gathers these intimate texts from the archive and pairs them with McCullers’ autobiography, signing her posthumous text for her. Here, again, we encounter the supplement—that which augments, but is never fully integrated into a totality, reminding us of the impossibility of the finished text, of plenitude. This is literalized by the fact that the letters are included following the autobiographical text, not inserted beginning on page 27; that is, they are not integrated into the autobiography at the point at which McCullers dictated their insertion. They form, in other words, a second half, juxtaposed with the first. As such, we cannot know whether McCullers would have selected these particular letters for inclusion, nor if she would have included personal photographs like those Dews selected for publication; nevertheless, her instruction to insert them affirms a desire to share her wartime experience with her then ex-husband with future readers. Such a juxtaposition

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<sup>104</sup> Compellingly, a November 29, 1967 letter from Mary Mercer mentions correspondence from Reeves McCullers and Annemarie Schwarzenbach among the war letters that McCullers collected (MC 296 Box 14 Folder 6-C).



commingles longing with national belonging, but revises heteronormative relations, expanding the narrative of love and care. These WWII letters, in ecstatic fashion, read against the grain of antiwar sentiment at the time of the *Illumination*'s dictation in 1967. The tumult of social events bursts through the text, as McCullers alludes to protests and widespread riots in protest over inadequate resources and opportunities in impoverished and de facto segregated communities (*ING* 65). Bedridden as she is in Nyack, NY, these events are mediated rather than witnessed firsthand.

McCullers' posthumous context presents a compelling counterpoint to that of Plath's. If, in Plath's case, the obsession has been with her fraught domestic life and on her work as a reflection of that life, McCullers' autobiography defamiliarizes the domestic sphere, opting to celebrate a bohemian lifestyle of communal living and homosociality over that of the mid-century's conventional narrative of a young married couple moving through life's milestones together—the husband's return home from the War, the births of children, the purchase of a home, etc. Carson and Reeves' relationship resists the notion of the nuclear family, as McCullers alludes to the two of them alternating turns living with others, rather than with each other, during their marriage. McCullers sustains a miscarriage, or what may have been a medical abortion, owing to her poor health, following *The Member of the Wedding*'s Broadway opening in 1950, which she did not attend out of anxiety (*ING* 47). Though McCullers lives in the mode of a being towards death, with her recurrent strokes and perpetual illnesses, when Reeves proposes that they commit suicide together, she leaves him in France and returns to the States. The imbricated dynamics of death and sociality that course through her life

writing instantiate, at the meta-level, the precarious status of the posthumous text as that which relies upon an ethics of care for its being.

Though McCullers lived some fourteen years past Reeves' suicide in Paris, her autobiography ends with his words, following a passage wherein McCullers recounts working through the experience of her difficult marriages to Reeves with Dr. Mercer. Mercer suggests, "But you must have had happy times," to which McCullers responds, "Yes." *Illumination and Night Glare* then concludes with the reminiscence: "He was of enormous value to me at the time I wrote [*Heart*] and [*Reflections*]. I was completely absorbed in my work, and if the food burned up he never chided me. More important, he read and criticized each chapter as it was being done. Once I asked him if he thought [*Heart*] was any good. He reflected for a long time, and then he said, 'No, it's not good, it's great'" (ING 78). This, the text's last line, is an ecstatic one that returns us, whether intentionally, or not, to the text's opening passage, which also recounts the period of illumination and creativity accompanying the inception of her relationship with Reeves and her authoring of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Such ecstatic temporalities urge us to consider the ways in which the past both shapes, but is also disrupted by singular temporalities that resist a unified narrative.

The commingling of love and work at the text's beginning and end, also invokes and expands the "we of me" to include McCullers' trust in and adoration of Mary Mercer; her devotion to her childhood piano teacher, Mary Tucker; and her love for the writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach, to whom she dedicated *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), just a year before Schwarzenbach died in a bicycle accident in Switzerland 1942.

McCullers' *Illumination and Night Glare* displays an awareness of, but consistent defamiliarization of mid-century norms. Her creative work is prioritized, and the performative acts that produce the effect of femininity—cooking, cleaning, self-maintenance, childrearing, and so on, that Elaine Tyler May documents in *Homeward Bound* her study of (white) 1950s domesticity—are put on the proverbial back burner. This is the standard by which McCullers judges her own success. Her rejection of socially-sanctioned norms persists across *Illumination and Night Glare*. McCullers' posthumous text ends with a return to its beginning: the birth of her artistic life and its contemporaneousness with falling in love—a story written into the complex dynamics of the shared signature.

#### The Author's Friendly Return: The Pleasures and Limits of the Biographic

When we read works of life writing, we are ushered into a narrative of (an)other. Such texts cannot recount every life detail; rather, they work as a nexus, or gathering place of memories, affording an affective connection with an other—in this instance, first between the author and the editor, then between these figures and the reader. The posthumous text showcases that the connection between author and reader in the Text is a co-existence brokered by the labor of the editor, who, in McCullers' case, supplements the late author's text, affirming her labor, and demonstrating what Gilmore terms the “shared signature” (204). Life writing is an ideal genre to explore such dynamics, as feminist scholarship recognizes the gap between the writing and written self; the writing of the self is always already bound up with dynamics of recognition, and an ethics of and

attachment to the other. Having been dictated to multiple others, whose identities are not all verifiable or known (Dews xiv), McCullers' text re-envisioned and re-purposed the conventions of the autobiographical to allow for bias, humor, whimsy, and inspiration. Its composition and publication history position us to read differently by embracing excess and, moreover, to affirm the dialogical, social thematics of McCullers' *oeuvre* at large. Such a move takes us away from the limits of the author function as emblemized by the signature, the sign of the originator, and toward the social interplay of self and other.

Years after his polemic "The Death of the Author" (1968), Barthes creates a space for the author's return, both in the act of reading, and in the author's own social fabric of creation and life experience. The pleasure afforded by the writerly text—that text that is endlessly plural—is the product of a collaborative, affective labor:<sup>105</sup>

The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author. Of course, the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions (history and courses in literature, philosophy, church discourse); he is not even the biographical hero. The author who leaves his text and comes into our life has no unity; he is a mere plural of 'charms,' the site of a few tenuous details, yet the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities, in which we nevertheless read death more certainly than in the epic of a fate; he is not a (civil, moral) person, he is a body. (*Sade* 8)

Barthes' emphasis on the body affirms the author as a mortal, rather than a moral person.

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<sup>105</sup> Regarding the writerly and the readerly text, see Barthes *S/Z: An Essay* (1974).

Such a shift moves us away from the sovereign entity of traditional autobiography—the didactic father, the “biographical hero”—and toward a plural subject, who enters into an ecstatic rapport with countless others in her lifetime and beyond. The poignancy of the mortal body simultaneously recognizes McCullers’ fragile health and her great perseverance to pursue her craft by way of dictation, after her body could no longer produce the movements of handwriting and typing. Barthes figures the friendly return of the author in terms of a coexistence between writer and reader; within this generative framework, the author is a complex dimension of meaning within the text, rather than the sovereign entity pulling the strings behind it, dictating meaning to the reader.<sup>106</sup> In this way, the author’s return revises the great authors paradigm by engaging instead with a plural potentiality that occurs in the breakdown, however ephemeral, of the subject/object divide in the mode of affiliative connection.

Barthes goes on to describe the whimsical notion of *biographemes*. His is an invitation to be touched by the author’s return, to be moved in ecstatic fashion:

For if [...] the Text [...] contains a subject to love, that subject is dispersed, somewhat like the ashes we strew into the wind after death (the theme of the *urn* and the *stone*, strong closed objects, instructors of fate, will be contrasted with *bursts* of memory, the erosion that leaves nothing but a few furrows of past life): were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections,

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<sup>106</sup> See Barthes’ “Preface” to *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (1976)

let us say: to ‘*biographemes*’ whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion. (*Sade* 9)

Barthes’ depiction of the author’s friendly return by way of biographemes disrupts the illusion that we can know the other by way of life writing. McCullers’ posthumous text escapes the containing urn of the closed, monological work, just as she resists the formulation of the omniscient author who dictates her intentions to us so that we may, at last, know how to read her work; in contrast, her generative text performs a series of disjunctive, ecstatic bursts of memory in keeping with the (auto)biographeme’s ability to touch us—those future bodies, whose own inevitable demise and bodily frailty is manifest in the urge to tell one’s life story to an other.

Dispersion, nevertheless, does not preclude an arresting of movement, whereby we may alight upon such “a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections” (9) during our reading practices in a way that affords pleasure, insight, and connection with an other. McCullers’ life and her texts are preserved, cared for by those future bodies, her readers, even as in reading her retrospective meditations we recognize that we, too, are subject to the same future dispersion. This ecstatic, juxtapositional rapport, ever prone to displacement, is not limited to posthumous texts and their late authors, but such texts amplify these often elided dynamics.

McCullers’ own penchant for noting biographemes abounds in *Illumination and Night Glare*; such details appear less as namedropping or gossip, but rather as tender odes to the many others who touched her life. These others are woven into the text and mark

both the exceptional and the familiar qualities of McCullers' experiences. We learn, for instance, of Isak Dinesens' preferred diet of oysters and champagne late in her life (*ING* 61), and of Tennessee Williams skills as a swimmer who regularly indulged in "Spuds Carson," McCullers' signature mashed-potato dish (*ING* 26), during her visits to his home in Nantucket. The privileging of such details points to sensorial pleasure as constitutive of human experience. *Biographemes* accorded to McCullers by her biographer Virginia Carr include McCullers' habit of smoking a pack of cigarettes every two hours, only taking a few drags off of each cigarette before moving onto a new one, and her habit of greeting guests in her white robe and sneakers with glass in hand, offering, "Toddy for the body?" (Carr 510). Again, these biographemes present the body as a sensorium—the site both of great pain, but just as often of great pleasure—reliant upon external stimuli as a mode of knowing the world and others. McCullers' life writing, like Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, is interested in the body as a vulnerable but necessary vessel in which to experience life.

McCullers' describes her own final life writing projects in terms of the social. In order to assess her strength to visit director John Huston at his home in Ireland toward the end of her life—Huston was working at the time on his film adaptation of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*—McCullers stayed briefly with her friend and longtime African American caretaker Ida Reeder in the Plaza Hotel in New York. In the same 1967 *New York Times* interview mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rex Reed reported that "her next books, she says, will be a collection of stories about Negroes she has known in the South ("The speech and feeling of one's childhood are always inherent to me as author and Negro

speech is so beautiful’) and, eventually, a journal about her life, her books, and why she wrote them.” Significantly, what McCullers describes here as two different projects merge into one in the text of *Illumination and Night Glare*, as biographemic sketches of African American men and women in her hometown of Columbus, Georgia, are recounted in McCullers’ autobiographical text alongside McCullers’ own childhood experiences and creative practices. Such a formal coexistence further dispels the solitary “I” of conventional autobiographical practice, and manifests the ongoing material and psychic processes of desegregation and interracial sociality.

Though McCullers left Georgia for New York when she was seventeen to become a writer, her fiction and life writing consistently return to the South in order to contest its hierarchical structures of domination and delimitation. *Illumination and Night Glare*’s glimpses of interracial intimacy and togetherness registers the fact of her last two writing projects becoming one in the typescript draft that she left behind at the time of her death. This convergence demonstrates the socio-cultural reality that black and white Americans were never truly materially or psychically separated from one another, in spite of Jim Crow’s structural aims. *Illumination and Night Glare* performs a social mode enmeshed in temporalities that gesture back toward a racialized past, inasmuch as they move into an unknowable future. In the text, McCullers describes witnessing as a child her family’s beloved fourteen year-old nurse and cook, Lucille, being refused a taxi cab ride home outside of their house during the Depression. When the driver called out, “I’m not driving no damn nigger,” Carson shouted at him, “You bad, bad man.” Her younger brother Lamar, burst out crying, and crawled into the dank space under their house (*ING* 54).



McCullers notes of segregation that it was not always “physical brutality, but the brutal humiliation of human dignity which is even worse” (*ING* 56). Such a scene, selected for inclusion in her life story decades after its occurrence—McCullers notes that “Lucille comes back to her over and over” (*ING* 56)—announces Jim Crow’s degrading rhetoric and its psychic ramifications on black and white subjects, demonstrating what McCullers calls “those hideous aspects of the South” (*ING* 62) that she wrestled with throughout her writing career, beginning with *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

The limits, however, of the shared signature, or of narrating another’s experiences alongside one’s own are clear in Lucille’s biographemic sketch. McCullers speaks more surely of her brother Lamar’s response to overt racism, than of Lucille’s; this effect is amplified by McCullers’ assertion that when Lucille was later sentenced to the penitentiary for a year after being accused of poisoning the white family she went to work for after Carson’s family, the Smiths, had to let her go during the Depression, “the experience did not harm her” (*ING* 56). McCullers’ sense of Lucille’s experience in jail not having affected her negatively is based upon her claim of Lucille “learn[ing] to sew and practice reading and writing ...[and receiving] a pretty good liberal education” (*ING* 56). This account reveals the limits of speaking for the other, particularly in regards to a white woman speaking on behalf of a woman of color, and of being incarcerated on false allegations—an unthinkable scenario for many whites—as not being a harmful experience. McCullers’ inclination, however well-intentioned, to include alongside her own the experiences of her family’s closeness to the African American women, like Lucille, who helped run their home, is problematic and indicative of the era’s paradoxes.

Attention to racial inequality, nevertheless, is a throughline in many of McCullers' reminiscences in *Illumination and Night Glare*. She recalls, for instance, being phoned by the Ku Klux Klan when she was convalescing in Columbus, Georgia following the controversial publication of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*; her father stood guard the rest of the night after a caller threatened, "[We] are the Klan and we don't like nigger lovers or fairies. Tonight will be your night" (*ING* 31). In spite of such harassment, McCullers later refused to give her papers to a segregated library that would deny access to her writings to people of color (Carr 493). If McCullers' attempts to address the reality and legacy of racism in *Illumination* are uneven, she fares better in the realm of fiction. In her autobiography, McCullers' says of Richard Wright, "Dick and I often discussed the South, and his book, [*Black Boy*,] is one of the finest books by a Southern [Negro.] He said of my work that I was the one Southern writer who was able to treat [Negroes] and white people with the same ease" (*ING* 64). In his review of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, written before the authors became roommates in Brooklyn, Wright admires the "sheen of weird tenderness" emitted by "the violent colors of the life she depicts"; he goes on to conclude, "to me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with the same ease and justice as those of her own race" ("Inner Landscape" 195).<sup>107</sup> McCullers' emphasis on sociality in both her fiction and life writing addresses our experiences as always already conditioned by race,

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<sup>107</sup> McCullers lived together with artists including Wright, Auden, and Isherwood, in Brooklyn Heights in the early 40s (*ING* 23). Years later, McCullers was staying in Richard and Tanya Wright's apartment in Paris when she suffered her most debilitating, deathlike stroke (*ING* 64).

gender, sexuality, and class. The privileging of embodied experience is suggestive of vulnerability and imbricatedness with one another, rather than the illusion of autonomy signaled by the traditional authorial signature of the proper subject. Remaining attentive to the mortal body and its biographemic charms unearths both pleasure and pain for writer and reader.

‘The We of Me’: Storytelling as Sociality in *The Member of the Wedding*

Setting McCullers’ life writing in an ecstatic, intertextual dialogue with her fiction affords insights that do not rely upon strict biographical correspondences, but instead invite McCullers’ friendly return, whereby our desire for the late author resides in ecstatic multiplicity, as she charms us with her panache for storytelling and for celebrating life’s illumination and night glare. In *The Member of the Wedding*, its protagonist, the twelve-year old Frankie Addams, experiences dread over feeling like a social outcast. She is described as feeling “unjoined” (*Member* 3); nevertheless, it is this very state of being that affords Frankie and the reader insight into her longing for the “we of me” (*Member* 42)—that shared desire to be in communion with an other, to be recognized.

Set during WWII, the bulk of McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) transpires over a few days in the life a young tomboy, Frankie Addams, who is on the verge of her entry into adolescence. Frankie longs to belong. At its outset, the novel imparts that “for a long time she had not been a member [...] Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid” (*Member* 3). This condition of being afraid of being “unjoined” speaks to the pressure to project an

integrated self who belongs wherever she goes. Frankie's frequent situatedness in doorways (*Member 3*) in the text signals her uncertainty regarding crossing the threshold into normative white womanhood. Gangly and tall for her twelve years, and branded as mean and greedy by those around her, Frankie shares similarities with *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter's* tomboy protagonist, Mick Kelley, who is also twelve, and whose adoration of the mute John Singer resonates with Frankie's desire to be a member of her brother's wedding, to marry his bride (*ING 32*). Frankie despairs at her loneliness, but continually lashes out at those closest to her. Her longing for membership is, at the conscious level, bound up with her brother's service in WWII, and his impending nuptials. Frankie envisions the act of belonging to the armed service, and of belonging to an other, as interwoven ways of being in the world that are constitutive of true happiness. Though Frankie is afforded companionship and support from Bernice Sadie Brown, her family's African American cook, and, in many ways, her surrogate mother, and John Henry West, her eccentric six year-old cousin and neighbor, she continually disavows their integral role in her life and her connection to them, often insulting them, even threatening them with violence, when they question her fantasy of becoming a member of the wedding.

Regarding this role, the narration repeatedly invokes Frankie's conception of the "we of me" (*Member 42*). Based upon her radiant impressions of future domestic bliss gleaned during her brother's brief visit home to introduce his fiancée Janice to the family, this formulation is predicated on Frankie's epiphanic desire to form a triumvirate with the pair:

*They are the we of me.* Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an *I* person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a *we* to claim, all other except her. When Berenice said *we*, she meant Honey and Big Mama, her lodge, or her church. The *we* of her father was the store. All members of clubs have a *we* to belong to and talk about. The soldiers in the army can say *we*, and even the criminals on chain-gangs. But the old Frankie had had no *we* to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer *we* of her and John Henry and Berenice—and that was the last *we* in the world she wanted. (*Member* 42; original emphases)

Why is this last “we” so undesirable? In stark contrast to the vision of Jarvis and Janice, the “we of me” of Berenice: a working-class black woman, whose string of abusive husbands after the loss of her first and only true love, Ludie, culminates with her fourth husband gouging out her eye, leaving her with a blue glass eye (*Member* 28), and John Henry: an introspective child who shuffles around in Berenice’s high heels (*Member* 112) and Frankie’s “old tarletan costume” (*Member* 133), hardly possess the social capital Frankie for which pines. She prefers to align herself with the iconic image of the (white) American soldier in uniform and his blushing bride. In this way, the “we of me” cuts two ways: Frankie perceives the we of me in terms of heteronormative belonging, whereas the text offers an alternative we of me in the queer time and space of the kitchen. Frankie relies upon this second formation for affection and connection, even as she disavows its importance to her life. The time this trio shares in the abject space of the kitchen both

generates and forecloses possibilities for being in this “terrible summer”—the temporally dense zone of the war’s ending at the macro-level and Frankie’s pained entrance into (white) female adolescence at the micro-level.

The third-person narration and Frankie herself use the adjective “queer” no less than thirty times in the text to describe impressions related to racialized sexuality and, more often, the space of the kitchen, where Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry spend each evening together.<sup>108</sup> This queering recalls the “third interval” that Esther Greenwood invokes when she encounters Doreen in the hallway of the women’s-only Amazon Hotel in *The Bell Jar*, affording insight into and a critique of the status quo. The alternative space of the kitchen, whose walls are covered in John Henry’s “queer drawings” (*Member 9*), is as sticky as a sweat lodge in the Southern heat, and provides a space for revelation, delivered in the mode of abject temporality. It is the space in which Frankie wields a knife on two occasions, threatening Berenice, before flinging it into the wall. Afraid of being identified as a criminal or a freak—these roles, too, are not the we of me Frankie envisions—she, nevertheless, continually dwells at the physical and psychic fringes of her small town milieu, pondering her “place” in the world. The space of the kitchen is an integral site for working through of matters of race, class, gender and sexuality—topics that are often attached to death, abjection and loss in the novel.

The kitchen is a space in the novel that affords what David Eng has termed more broadly the queer kinship of affiliation, like the homosocial spaces of the Amazon Hotel

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<sup>108</sup> The queer space of the kitchen is where Frankie, Berenice and John Henry discuss the transgendered black character Lily Mae Jenkins (81); Lily Mae Jenkins appears in McCullers’ outline for “The Mute” (*ING* 176), but not in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

and the asylum in *The Bell Jar*.<sup>109</sup> In *The Member of the Wedding*, the kitchen affords an alternative to segregation and to the monological narratives of abstract citizenship and national belonging. It is in the space of the kitchen that this triumvirate eats each other's favorite dishes, sings one another's favorite songs, and hypothesizes endlessly about why things are the way they are. The kitchen is presented as a space that is eccentric to the Law of the Father—both Frankie's literal father, and the Symbolic Order of their small Southern town. The nexus of these social forces is woven into the triumvirate's "last queer conversation" (*Member* 119). Berenice, at Frankie's request, tells her tale anew of her one true love, Ludie, whom she lost to illness. Though Frankie never met him—indeed, he passed away just as she was born—she feels an affinity for him, derived from Berenice's incantatory telling of their love, that is likened repeatedly to a song and a bell (*Member* 84; 91; 101). In response, Frankie and John Henry grieve for Ludie along with Bernice. Frankie's affective bond with Ludie surprises her, as she feels more for his passing years ago, than when she hears of the sudden passing of her great-uncle that very day (*Member* 103). That Frankie feels more kinship with Berenice's lost love than her own blood relative signals the power of the biographemic "to touch some future body" (Barthes 9). Such an affective bond is linked to the intercultural power of storytelling, which is figured as a rhythmic song in the text.

It is in the kitchen, then, that Bernice, Frankie, and John Henry fuse into one being late in the novel. Though Frankie has again threatened Berenice with a knife, the latter takes her into her arms and enfolds her on her lap. Frankie rests upon Berenice's

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<sup>109</sup> See Eng *The Feeling of Kinship* 58-92

lap, nestled into her shoulder, and John Henry wriggles to get in close, ultimately climbing up behind them, wrapping his arm around Bernice's head. Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry melt into one, temporarily suspending the subject/object divide, and the outside world. In this semiotic space of abundance, the interstitial space of the we of me comes to fruition. The alternative figured here is both revelatory and fleeting. This desire to get in close: for proximity, emerges as the "we of me" that Frankie consistently misrecognizes; she excuses this we of me, however, as a poor substitute for her fantasy of joining the heteronormative couple, Jarvis and Janice, a fixation that Bernice aptly calls a "mania" (*Member 108*). But even after this scene of intimacy and connection has passed, the text preserves it in ecstatic fashion, as modeled by Ludie's ecstatic presence, and in contrast to Frankie's lament that once a moment passes, it is gone forever (*Member 121*).

This passage affords a compelling commentary on the logic and limits of abstract citizenship and national belonging in this era. Fused as the three are in physical proximity, where indeed their sweat and soon their tears commingle, Berenice imparts: "Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself" (*Member 119*). Bernice lays bare the double-bind of being a black subject in the Jim Crow South. We might also add the triple bind, as Zora Neale Hurston does in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (44), of being born a black woman, subjugated to black men.<sup>110</sup> Frankie adds, "Yet at the same time you almost might use the word loose instead of caught. Although they are two opposite words" (*Member 120*). Paradoxically, one condition is

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<sup>110</sup> See also bell hooks *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981)



not possible without the other. The novel's interest in being an unjoined person speaks to the fundamental alienation of human experience, even as this condition is only felt insofar as we are always already joined to one another, simultaneously loose and caught.

Tellingly, the three begin to weep, each for their own reasons, yet, in some inexpressible way, their tears unite them. Though they often sing together in the text, this is the first time that they have wept together. Signaling a profound and futural loss, this is the last time that they will be together in the kitchen, as John Henry passes away from meningitis not long afterwards. When they at last peel themselves apart from one body back into three, Bernice switches on the light, and “the three of them blinked at each other in the light as though they were three strangers or three ghosts” (*Member* 123). Such a description speaks to the ephemerality of this temporally dense encounter with the past and the future, and with interracial and intergenerational intimacy. This passage resists what Sharon Holland condemns as “the spectacular lie of our separation from one another as communities and individuals on this planet”; against racist and sexist interpellations, Holland advocates for the “stubborn insistence that we do belong to one another despite our every effort, at home and in the institution, to lose track of, if not forget altogether, such belonging” (15). This profound encounter with an ex-centric “we of me” lingers, even as Frankie continues to seek concentric normative belonging.

At the end of the text, Frankie awaits her new friend Mary Littlejohn, the sign of her belonging to (an)other, at last. Mary's mother ends Frankie's annual tradition of staring at the “freaks” in the Fair's “Freak Pavilion”—another site of Frankie's simultaneous fascination with and repulsion by alternative modes of belonging—calling

the scene “morbid” (*Member* 161). Echoing the empty refrain of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Frankie rehearses, “I am just mad about Michelangelo” (*Member* 159), as she prepares tiny sandwiches for Mary’s visit, insinuating that she has, in many ways, opted for a normative social identity. Nevertheless, just as Plath’s Esther Greenwood leaves the asylum full of “question marks” (*BJ* 243), Berenice’s presence in the kitchen and the specter of John Henry persist as ecstatic alternatives to a mainstream performance of white womanhood. In this way, the novel makes room for the transformational potential of sociality, even as it lays bare its fragility and the necessity of care for its survival—features at play in the posthumous publication of McCullers’ life writing.

### Conclusion

In 1954, Carson McCullers gave a handful of lectures in New York at the Poetry Center of Young Men and at the Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YWHA) with Tennessee Williams by her side. This instance of the shared signature recalls the two working at opposite ends of the same table as he was writing *Summer and Smoke* and she was adapting *The Member of the Wedding* for the stage in the summer of 1946. She recalls in *Illumination and Night Glare* that she received a fan letter from Williams, inviting her to stay with him, as he believed he was dying (26). In the archived audio of the hour and forty-minute long lecture delivered at the YWHA, McCullers shares that she arrived to a house full of broken windows from a storm, and in her room a cat had delivered kittens on her bed—indeed, she stepped on a fishhead in the morning! In this

setting, the two wrote and swam and read poetry to one another, particularly that of Hart Crane, forging what would be their lasting friendship. She frequently pauses in her reflections about writing, asking Williams, whom she calls Tenn, to read aloud from each of her novels to extend her ideas about writing back into her fiction. The effect of listening to the archived audio cassette is polyphonic and poignant, demonstrative of the biographemic return of the author, rendered ecstatic in the posthumous context of the archive. Such a reading points to an ethics of care, for the editor's and the reader's engagement with such texts disrupts the subject/object distinction, setting the living in an ecstatic rapport with the departed, and the present in dialogue with the past. Such boundary crossings of historically contingent times and spaces illuminate the interwoven experiences of self and other.

McCullers' autobiographical text gives us countless "biographemic" glimpses that foster her friendly return; her poignant creative labor in the face of great suffering invites our meditations and our care. Of course, this notion also bears relevance to texts published by authors in the span of their lifetimes who are now deceased. McCullers reanimates her moments of artistic illumination in the midst of her own being towards death. These (auto)biographemic glimmerings are dictated to others in 1967, and eventually, some thirty years later, signed by Dews on McCullers' behalf, to be shared with future readers. McCullers' experimental, non-chronological narrative gives voice to the ecstatic deferral of human temporality in a way that is ever-cognizant of embodiment. Her (auto)biographemic approach, in turn, affords us a social intimacy with the author, as we encounter McCullers' mortal body, gripping a pencil, or typing with one finger of the

right hand, in spite of daily pain, then eventually dictating sentences to an other, but writing, always writing, to share her insights with posterity and in communion with herself and others.<sup>111</sup> The subversive effects of such an approach and its importance for feminist articulations of lived experience implicitly involve a deconstruction of the patriarchal logic of teleological imperatives and causality, with their homogenizing effects on meaning making. Such a move invariably exposes the forces of desire and the imbricated nature of one's own experiences with the experiences of others.

McCullers' autobiography generates a temporal excess that is at work in its elliptical omissions, non-linearity, and its tension with what editor Dews calls the "strict biographical record" (xxi)—a record, I would add, that is always already an impossibility. Her text affords us insights into her creative production without our having to strive for one-to-one correspondences between her stated intentions and her work, nor her exceptional life circumstances with that of her fictional characters. My emphasis in expanding our approach to biographical criticism by way of feminist autobiography studies and Barthes' formulation of the author's friendly return is an effort to reckon with the unique forms of the editorial and archival supplement that register our desire to sustain the author in the world. By way of her texts, McCullers ever greets us at the door in her white robe and sneakers, with her cinnamon-ey drawl: posthumous texts are a way of late authors *being* in the world and so are deserving of an ethics of preservation, of care, or, as Derrida so aptly says of the work of mourning, of our *hospitality* toward the

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<sup>111</sup> See Stuart Sherman's profile "Carson McCullers" in *BOMB Magazine* 33 (Fall 1990). 23 Mar. 2015. Web. Sherman sat with McCullers and read to her in her last year.

departed. The author's return takes on poignant valences in the posthumous context surrounding the legacy of the late African American expatriate author William Demby and his as-yet unpublished novel *King Comus*.

## Chapter Four

### The Posthumous Archive: The Ecstatic Temporality of William Demby's

#### Postwar Writing

So Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what  
good is a liturgy without a text?

—Ishmael Reed *Mumbo Jumbo*

Why is it that we know so much about certain authors' biographies, and so little about others? How is it that some author functions circulate with ease and seeming transparency, while others never quite cohere in order to function as such? This project began with a critique of the overreliance on biographical criticism as a means to anchor the uncertain status of posthumously published work, and ends with an application of how we might view and practice biographical criticism differently. As discussed in the previous chapter, making room for the author's return in our readings by way of what Barthes terms *biographemes*, or tenuous, even playful, details (*Sade* 9), is a mobile, self-reflexive critical practice; such an approach complements feminist poststructuralist interventions in life writing studies that have application for literary study, as well. In favor of a plural figure, ever subject to ecstatic dispersion, such critiques call attention to the narrativizing practices that go into writing a life, displacing the notion of a unified originator/father figure whose stated intentions and biography determine meaning for the passive or faithful reader. The ecstatic effect of the biographemic is "to touch some future body" by way of "a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections" gleaned from the author's embodied life experiences (Barthes 9).

This chapter welcomes the *biographemic* return to critical and literary discourse of the late African American expatriate author William Demby, who spent decades in Rome following his service there in World War II. The chapter extends and develops this project's broader literary engagement with the mid-century and the black freedom struggle with discussions of Demby's first two novels, *Beetlecreek* (1950) and *The Catacombs* (1965); I explore these novels' shared interest in engaging temporality, albeit with distinct aesthetic techniques, alongside Demby's work in this period as an expatriate author, journalist, and screenwriter, based on my archival research with the author's papers. I conclude with a meditation regarding the enigmatic posthumous status of *King Comus*, Demby's as-yet unpublished final novel, the product of some twenty-five years of literary labor, which I have had the privilege of reading during my research.

I explore Demby's role as an ecstatic black author in terms of his border crossings, both literal and metaphorical, of time and space in his work. His ex-centricity from mainstream postwar America imbues his writing with a critical reflexivity that has been sorely under-recognized in literary historical accounts of the period. It has become a commonplace in studies of European American expatriate literature to claim that literal distance from the United States afforded writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, critical distance in their writing. There is still much more to be said, however, about how literal and critical distance shaped the work of African American expatriate artists, whose decision to remain abroad after WWII was influenced by institutionalized racism and its delimitations at home. Valuable scholarship has been written about African American expatriate writers in Paris, namely Richard

Wright and James Baldwin, but important work remains to be done on African American artists and their international creative cohorts in postwar Rome, where the academic and cultural left, though considered part of the bourgeoisie, shared revolutionary aims with the avant-garde.<sup>112</sup> I gesture toward the fruitfulness of such work with this chapter. Given the dearth of information available in criticism and online about Demby, I provide a biographical sketch of the author's life—drawing on archival materials and the author's own recollections—while remaining cognizant that this, too, is a narrative, selectively and often chronologically ordered.

During his decades living as an expatriate artist in Italy and during his years in New York, Demby penned five pioneering, but under-researched, novels. His first novel, *Beetlecreek* (1950), though set in rural West Virginia, was composed in Italy upon Demby's return there in 1947, following his service in an African American artillery unit. Demby's second novel, *The Catacombs* (1965), published fifteen years later, takes a markedly postmodern, metafictional turn, as the narrator "Bill Demby," an African American expatriate author living in Rome, is writing a novel within the novel, and performs the daily experiment of juxtaposing newspaper headlines during the period of 1962-64, with meditations upon historical, "Gothic" time. Demby's third novel *Love Story Black* (1978), published by the independent press of Cannon, Johnson and Reed, features another metafictional protagonist and addresses, and in some cases parodies, many key aspects and concerns of the Black Arts movement: education, upward mobility,

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<sup>112</sup> See, for instance, Michel Fabre. *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (1991) and Ewa Luczak. *How Their Living Outside America Affected Five African American Authors: Toward a Theory of Expatriate Literature* (2010). Luczak's study includes a chapter on Demby that focuses on the movement of negritude.



literary nationalism, back to Africa movements, capitalism and communism, black women's magazines, unrecorded histories of black cultural figures, and, as the title suggests, the structuring absence of love stories in black fiction. Demby's fourth novel, *Blue Boy* (1980), like *Beetlecreek*, is a coming of age narrative; the novel, however, is out of print, and curiously, Demby commented in an interview that he never saw a copy of it himself.<sup>113</sup> Demby spent the last twenty-five years of his career penning *King Comus*. Obsessed as Demby's published *oeuvre* is with questions of historical time and human temporality, this chapter reads Demby's first two novels, *Beetlecreek* (1950) and *The Catacombs* (1965), in ecstatic dialogue with *King Comus*.

Demby's own comments regarding authorship, given in a 2011 interview a few years before his passing, add a compelling layer to a consideration of the author's return, and of *King Comus*' overdetermined status as an unpublished posthumous novel:

Not to write too many books is a way to stay alive. If you wrote a book every few years, in that amount of time you would have buried yourself. And it takes so long for a book to enter into the consciousness of a generation. [...] You have to be in literary times, you have to wait until your previous work has been discussed, and just when they think you are dead, you do another work! (Micconi 139)

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<sup>113</sup> Demby states in the interview that he submitted *Blue Boy* for a faculty requirement at CUNY Staten Island. The novel was apparently published by Knopf Doubleday in 1980, but Demby never saw a copy of it himself. Knopf confirmed the ISBN number for me, but has yet to recover a copy of the novel. This shadow text is worthy of contemplation in its own right, demonstrating that the act of publication does not guarantee circulation nor reception. See interview with Steve Kemme. "William Demby: A Writer's Life." *Mosaic* 20 (2007) Web. 26 Apr. 2015.

This philosophy mobilizes the trope of resurrection that runs through this project. The posthumous text, once resurrected in the wake of the author's death, does not enter seamlessly into linear time, but operates in ecstatic fashion. In spite of his remarkable biography and creative innovations at the level of style, form, and content, Demby's literary contributions have been sorely neglected in critical discourse. This chapter aims to consider Demby's role(s) in "literary times" in an open-ended, ecstatic fashion that resists the logic of canonization and literary lineage.

In his foreword to a 1991 reissue of *The Catacombs* (1965), theologian and African American literary scholar Nathan Scott lamented that "by some unfortunate miscarriage of advertisement the fiction of William Demby over more than a generation has remained little known and is not today generally accorded the prominence in the canon of Afro-American literature that it deserves" (ix).<sup>114</sup> What accounts for the serious dearth of biographical information and critical scholarship available related to Demby's life and work? One factor might be Demby's general lack of interviews—excepting an extended interview with John O'Brien in 1971—which delimits an overreliance on statements of authorial intention.<sup>115</sup> Some have suggested that the temporal gap between Demby's first two novels and their dramatic shifts in style make "easy classification" of the author and his work difficult (Christensen 123). In this vein, a short piece written by Joseph Connelly in the mid-seventies, opens with a curious observation: "Two novels

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<sup>114</sup> An MLA bibliographic search yields less than twenty critical sources related to Demby's body of work, only a handful of which are longer than ten pages, with the majority being biographical and bibliographical sourcebook entries. Web. 31 Mar. 2015.

<sup>115</sup> See O'Brien. "Interview with William Demby." *Interviews with Black Writers* (1973). O'Brien also interviewed Ellison and Reed, among many others.

very different in theme, setting, structure and tone account for the total opus of William Demby, an expatriate Black living in Rome. The fifteen years between *Beetlecreek* (1950) and *The Catacombs* (1965) contribute to these differences and give the appearance of a hardly productive author” (100). Such an assumption, however, signals entrenched conceptions of normative composition time and finishedness, as well as a capitalistic ethos of efficiency and productivity that recalls critiques of Ellison’s second novel in progress. It also indicates the extent to which novels are read in tandem with their authors’ biographies and according to the logic of succession. In turn, Connelly goes on to maintain that “a glimpse into the author’s personal life helps explain the long duration between novels” (100). Citing Demby’s years abroad and alluding to his work in journalism and film translation, Connelly takes a vague biographical turn to account for Demby’s apparent lack of output. He then forges a correspondence between Demby’s “lack of artistic production” (100) and the representation of the metafictional narrator “Bill Demby’s” artistic crisis in *The Catacombs*, concluding, “*The Catacombs* is the documentary of [1962-64] and, more importantly, of a segment of William Demby’s life” (102). Certainly Demby is playing with his “biography” in his second novel, but here the critic subscribes to a belief in the documentation of reality and an aesthetic individualism that elides both the novel’s postmodern play and its broader political implications.

My archival work with Demby’s papers from the 1950s and 60s directly contradicts the problematic assessment of a lack of productivity on Demby’s part. Demby’s uncatalogued, domestic archive, currently housed in his son’s residence, demonstrates Demby’s prolific work as a journalist, screenwriter, and film translator in

the fifteen-year period between his first two novels. Such genre crossing points to the author's own border crossing in the period back and forth between Italy and the United States, but also on writing assignments to such countries as Ethiopia and Japan. Demby's work in journalism and the Italian film industry directly informs the radical shift in style between *Beetlecreek* (1950) and *The Catacombs* (1965). Demby's transnational intellectual labor and writings disrupt national borders and causal timelines, even as this posthumous archive resists conventional hierarchies in literary study that revere the novel, while degrading other forms of writing as commercial, or as lacking artistic merit. Demby's writing across genre in this period signals a move toward a radical black postmodernism that is playful but potent in its aesthetics and political investments.<sup>116</sup>

Across Demby's *oeuvre*, there is an interplay between realism, modernism, and postmodernism, that reminds us, as Spillers does, that "between Dreiser and Ellison a radically new literary reality asserts itself basically combative toward the past" ("Ellison's Usable Past" 65). This attitude of pronounced skepticism, even hostility, toward the past finds ever greater expression in the fragmentation of black postmodern form and style. Demby's aesthetic innovation, which emerges in the juxtapositional and citational style and elliptical form of *The Catacombs* (1965), remains attentive to social identity and to liberationist struggles. "Radical postmodernism," bell hooks writes, "calls attention to those shared sensibilities ['deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding'] which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be

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<sup>116</sup> Linda Hutcheon makes a similar point regarding Ishmael Reed's 1970s fiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, noting that "Reed is always serious beneath his parodic play" (134).

fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition” (2481). Demby’s postwar writings register this many-layered call. With its sweeping time-span and interest in global affinities and affiliative networks, Demby’s *The Catacombs*, in particular, creates a space for such considerations, as in the following passage:

Life is existence and existence is sacred, the now-forgotten sacred law that governs the dance hall and traffic, the tidal flows of rivers and volcanic lakes, the gestation cycles of pregnant squids, the migration of birds, the migration of undesirable peoples (yellow-brown-black-and-white-all-are-precious-in-his-sight), that governs the universe, the Univac, the timing of aging TV comedians’ electronically-inserted laughs, that solemn rock-bottom law of Transformation (or plastically, three-dimensionally, Transmutation)... (202)

This calling forth of flows of peoples, nature, technology and temporality, is indicative of a radical aesthetic that imagines alternative and communal formations in the modes of resistance and survival, in keeping with Fred Moten’s philosophy of affective solidarity in practice.<sup>117</sup>

If Ellison’s role as a black author during the Black Arts Movement, as discussed in Chapter One, was characterized in terms of failure for his lack of public participation in the movement, Demby’s role is perhaps even more complex, as he was living abroad during the height of black literary nationalism but remained deeply invested in its

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<sup>117</sup> See Moten. “Black Op.” *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1743-1747. Print.

revolutionary aims. Unlike fellow expatriate authors James Baldwin and Richard Wright who had pronounced roles as literary figures during the black freedom struggle, Demby's role was not broadly recognized on a domestic or international stage. Operating alongside, but not quite in the spotlight of the Black Arts Movement, Demby espoused a political commitment to a black literary genealogy, commenting in the early 1970s that:

the black writer ... is the only one who will be giving voice to the experience of black people ... The novel is a new thing [for black persons], and so it's useless to pretend that you're in some kind of universal tradition when, in reality, you are not. You're excluded from that, and so that is always at the back of your mind as you write.

You are one of the very few among the family of your people who are putting things down in this form. (O'Brien qtd. in Perry 64)

Demby showcases a self-awareness of his role as a black writer and the imbricatedness of his lived experience with his aesthetic projects by way of his sustained use of semi-autobiographical details throughout his *oeuvre*. He deploys metafictional narrators beginning with his second novel *The Catacombs*; significantly, this is a narrative device that undermines authority in favor of thematic uncertainty and ambivalence, generating new forms and meanings that commingle with the author's plural return in the text.

Edward Margolies' 1968 review of *The Catacombs* is useful for gaining a sense of the critical perception of Demby's position within the Black Arts Renaissance:

Although Demby's theme is less sensational than some of the shriller expressions of negritude, he may be more representative of a newer

generation of authors than is generally supposed. Which is not to say that his style or methods have influenced others—it is most probable that his novel is unknown—but that his tone, a kind of contained passion, extending beyond anger, implying a deep racial wisdom, is something he shares with the younger writers. [...] the new authors are credible almost because they do not care whether we listen. They relate in one way or another the stages through which they have had to pass—despair, self-doubt, humiliation, suffering and an awakened knowledge of the sickness of white society—to arrive at their peculiar black sophistication (252-3).<sup>118</sup>

The review explicitly invokes the binary between Wright’s revolutionary realism—here characterized as Baldwin’s and Baraka’s “shriller expressions of negritude”—and the apolitical high modernism of Ellison. Demby’s “peculiar black sophistication” is aligned with the latter; the review places Baldwin and Baraka on the “separatist,” black nationalist end of the black literary spectrum, while Demby is situated on the “accommodation” end.<sup>119</sup> As Chapter One of this project argues, such a schema fails to acknowledge Ellison’s radical aesthetics—he was actively composing his second novel

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<sup>118</sup> The review groups Lewis M. Killian’s *The Impossible Revolution* (1968), Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), and Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968) with a reading of Demby’s *The Catacombs* (1965). Along with Demby, Margolies includes writers Kristin Hunter, William Melvin Kelley, John A. Williams, and Charles Wright as the “new generation.”

<sup>119</sup> Margolies included discussions of Demby’s work in his book *Native Sons* (1968), and Demby’s short fiction in the *Native Sons Reader* (1970). Demby, in fact, returned to the US permanently in 1969 to teach English courses at CUNY Staten Island, at Margolies’ invitation. Demby visited Italy often and returned to live in Tuscany in the late 1980s to care for his ailing wife, residing there for nearly a decade in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century villa that Lucia Drudi inherited from her aunt.

and publishing excerpts of it in this period—just as it flattens out Baldwin’s and Baraka’s distinct and heterogeneous literary projects. Moreover, in contrast to this assessment, Demby’s writings and papers evidence that his work bears strong ties to the black radical tradition, operating as his work does across boundaries and cultures, perhaps largely undetectable and diffuse in its time, but politically-engaged nevertheless.

#### The Ecstatic Period Between and Beyond *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs*

How did Demby end up in Italy? To start at the beginning, with the familiar contours of biography: William Demby, son of William and Gertrude Demby, was born into a large, religious middle-class African American family on Christmas Day in 1922 in Pittsburgh. Of his childhood, he remarked, “Like so many Negroes of those days, I instinctively assumed multiple personalities and masks, and I realized that to survive the stress of multi-identities you had to become resigned to becoming more than one person” (Micconi 124). Demby channeled this survival strategy into imagining several possibilities for his self-fashioned future as an artist: he played saxophone in a jazz band with Bob Cooper and he visited the Carnegie Museum, which was miles from his home, at least once a week to “gaze for hours at the works of the Italian artists, modernists like Giorgio de Chirico,” painting versions of what he had seen and dreaming of moving to Europe (Micconi 124).<sup>120</sup> His family relocated from their predominantly European immigrant neighborhood in Pittsburgh to an African American neighborhood in

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<sup>120</sup> Demby’s cousin was celebrated jazz saxophonist Benny Carter.



Clarksburg, West Virginia in 1941.<sup>121</sup> The Dembys, however, were in the unique position of living in a gothic mansion, owing to Demby's father's reputable position at the Hope Natural Gas Company (Micconi 125). Demby went on to study at West Virginia State College, taking a writing class there with poet Margaret Walker (Perry 59). During World War II, he left college to train in an African American cavalry unit in Fort Clark, Texas, but when his unit was deployed, they were instructed that they would be driving trucks, not riding horses, during their time in North Africa and Italy.<sup>122</sup> During his service, Demby honed his journalistic skills, writing articles for *Stars and Stripes*. Upon his return to the US, Demby made the conscious decision to attend a historically black university; he graduated on the GI Bill from Fisk, whose dynamic intellectual environment afforded him the opportunity to study with poet Robert Hayden and to forge a relationship with writer and Fisk librarian Arna Bontemps, who remained a lifelong friend.<sup>123</sup> Upon graduating from Fisk, Demby returned to Italy in 1947.<sup>124</sup> His desires were multiple: to

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<sup>121</sup> This is in contrast to Margolies' assumption, writing in 1968, that Demby "was brought up in the relatively confining atmosphere of the Negro ghettos of Pittsburgh and a West Virginia mining town" (*Native Sons* 175).

<sup>122</sup> Demby remarked, "It was clear we were not going to be fighters; we were Negro troops. There was only one fighting unit; my brother [Frank] was in that one, the 92<sup>nd</sup> division" (Micconi 125).

<sup>123</sup> Hayden oversaw the Fisk paper, for which Demby wrote articles and stories; Demby's artwork is featured in Hayden's poetry collection *The Lion and the Archer* (1948).

<sup>124</sup> Incidentally, Carson and Reeves McCullers were also in Rome in April of 1947. The two moved into Richard Wright's apartment in Paris in the late summer, where McCullers suffered a major stroke. They returned to Rome in February-April of 1952, before buying a home near Paris; they returned again to Rome in September through late October, where McCullers worked on the script for a David O. Selznick film *Terminal*

paint and study Art History at the University of Rome, to play jazz clarinet and, above all, to become a writer.

Demby describes the appeal of moving to Rome, as opposed to the more obvious choice of Paris, as being wrapped up with an image of “the gritty life of the pure artist as depicted in Roberto Rossellini’s films” (Micconi 126). Following a chance encounter aboard a train upon his arrival in Rome, Demby fell in almost immediately with a group of artists and filmmakers in the dynamic artistic milieu of the postwar period. Gaspare Del Corso, owner of Galleria dell’Obelisco, and his wife Irene Brin, a writer for *Vogue*, dubbed the young group of artists “the Portonaccio Group,” after the “bleak Portonaccio quarter of Rome with its funereal high-rise housing developments,” where Demby’s roommate, filmmaker Renzo Vespignani, grew up, and which became “the political landscape of almost every neo-realist film” (Demby “An American Negro Survives” II-I). Demby was aware of his unique choice to move to Rome, for though there were thousands of African American servicemen in Italy during the War, he relates, “Indeed, those first years of my return to Rome after the war I had the eerie feeling of being the only Negro in Italy, since I seldom saw another Negro on the streets or met Negroes in the intellectual salons I was beginning to frequent” (“An American Negro Survives” II-II). Such an impression lends insight to his role as an ecstatic artist, ex-centric to both US and Italian cultures, writing from a critical distance.

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*Station* (1953), starring Montgomery Clift, and directed by Vittorio De Sica. She was apparently fired and Truman Capote is credited with the script. In another Italian connection, McCullers’ poem “The Dual Angel,” and Demby’s “The Rainbow,” were both published in 1953 in the esteemed literary review *Botteghe Oscure* in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> issues, respectively. I have not found evidence that the two met during McCullers’ multiple extended stays in Rome, though it is quite possible that they crossed paths.

During this period, Demby moved in with members of the Portonaccio Group on Via San Teodoro, a narrow lane just opposite the Forum, overlooking the remains of the Ancient City, and just a stone's throw from the Coliseum and Circus Maximus. Living in such incredible proximity to the Ancient City infuses Demby's postwar writings with a sense of historical time's place in the present, focusing as his work does upon nested temporalities and juxtapositionality. He absorbed the revolutionary postwar attitude of skepticism from his flatmates, as filmmaker Vespignani, for instance, would bring Gramsci's "Letters from Prison" to the dinner table, eating without looking up from the page. Demby had never heard Gramsci's name before his return to Rome, but in time, Demby would contribute articles to the communist newspaper *Paese Sera* ("An American Negro Survives" II-II).

In this stimulating and serious milieu, which married art with praxis across class lines, he began writing his first novel *Beetlecreek*. He worked on the novel while staying in Salzburg in 1947; the novel came together while he was staying in Alex Randolph's Palazzo Dario in Venice. Randolph, a former OSS intelligence officer who became a board game developer, also stayed in the apartment on Via Teodoro, and became a lifelong friend (Micconi 126). *Beetlecreek* was published in English on Rinehart in 1950, and in the same year on a major Italian imprint Mondadori, translated by celebrated writer and translator Fernanda Pivano as *Festa a Beetlecreek*. The US publication featured an elliptical blurb from Ralph Ellison—"it's a good book"—a writer whom Demby greatly admired.<sup>125</sup> The novel grew out of a short story "Saint Joey" that Demby

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penned while studying with Robert Hayden at Fisk, and published in the university paper in 1946 (Perry 60). In college, Demby had reviewed Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1943) for the paper, which many have pointed to as an influence on his first novel's existentialist themes.<sup>126</sup> *Beetlecreek* features a spare modernist style and an innovative engagement with the "strange temporality" (Holland 37) of interracial sociality that has much in common with McCullers' fiction, particularly her final novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961).<sup>127</sup>

The novel gives voice to the ecstatic inner worlds of four characters living in the backwater town of Beetlecreek, West Virginia in the Depression-era: Johnny Johnson, an African American adolescent who comes to stay with his uncle in Beetlecreek, while his widowed mother convalesces in a Pittsburgh hospital, and who is pressured to join the town's gang, "The Nightriders"; David Diggs, Johnny's uncle, who had dreams of leaving Beetlecreek as a young man to pursue his passion as a painter, but who now paints signs for a living; David's wife, Mary, who does not understand her husband's remoteness, and who focuses her energies on planning church events and working in the home of a white family; and Bill Trapp, a lonely, elderly white man and former circus

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<sup>125</sup> Though Ellison was on fellowship at the American Academy in Rome from 1955-57—the fifth writer to receive the Rome Prize—beginning his second novel, I have not found evidence that Ellison and Demby met. According to biographer Rampersad, the reclusive Ellison stayed mostly on site at the Academy (318), up on Gianicolo, one of the highest hills in Rome.

<sup>126</sup> See Fader 62; Margolies 174; Bone ("Introduction" to *Beetlecreek* 1969 reprint)

<sup>127</sup> Reviewer M. Carl Holman likens *Beetlecreek* to *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) in his 1950 review, and in his preface to the 1991 reprint of *The Catacombs* Nathan A. Scott compares *Beetlecreek* to both Carson McCullers' and John Dos Passos' work.

worker, whose small, shabby farm is located between the black and white sections of town. When Johnny is caught plucking apples from Bill Trapp's tree—the other boys who take him there run off when Trapp appears—Trapp invites Johnny to his porch for cider. The reclusive Trapp has not spoken to a single person for some fifteen years. Johnny's Uncle David also shows up to Trapp's house when word quickly spreads of his nephew having been caught by Trapp; he, too, is offered refreshment and the three men share a pleasant evening together. This radical breaking of silence and isolation across racial and generational lines releases a subversive force that flows through the town and culminates with Trapp's death by the novel's end.

Trapp, energized by this human contact, begins a series of kind acts: he gives two white girls cups of cider, and two African American girls a wheelbarrow full of giant pumpkins for their church benefit, and plans a picnic for the town's black and white children. The results, however, are disastrous, as he is falsely accused of molestation by one of the white children, and almost overnight, he is branded a "sex-fiend" (151) by the entire town. In the African American section of town, the townspeople repeatedly comment that the man would have been lynched if he had been a black man; one man directly mentions the "Scottsboro" trials (*Beetlecreek* 151).<sup>128</sup> As an initiation rite, the town's gang commands Johnny to punish Trapp for his alleged perversion by burning

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<sup>128</sup> In a notorious instance of racial injustice, nine African American teens, who came to be known as the "Scottsboro Boys," were falsely accused by two white women of raping them aboard a train in Alabama in 1931. The men's trials were botched and characterized by racist juries. Though one of the women eventually retracted the charge, the men served prison sentences and were threatened and brutalized throughout the flawed proceedings.

down his house. Though Johnny has resisted their pressure to join them in sexual acts and acts of physical violence before, his growing urge to be a “member” (*Beetlecreek* 166) leads him to capitulate to this request.<sup>129</sup> In his discussion of interracial encounters in *Beetlecreek*, Tyler Schmidt observes that the novel’s climax “[reminds] us how deeply threatening these desegregationist acts were to the Cold War ideology of containment” (137). Johnny’s violent initiation into black manhood—which, like McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* and Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, performs a subversion of coming of age narratives and the logic of national belonging—leads to Trapp’s terrible death.

The narration related to Johnny’s Uncle David’s frustrated experience continually foreshadows that, in coming to stay in Beetlecreek, Johnny has come to a death-driven place, entrenched in the stultifying status quo of Jim Crow. This temporalized legacy of racism is the effect of the racialized past of slavery in the novel’s Depression-era present. David’s teenage crush, Edith, returns to town to attend the funeral of her adoptive mother; Edith’s critical distance as a black female outsider in her “hometown” resides in her rejection of a model of familial legitimacy that denies her belonging. This recalls Ellison’s engagement with the family as a metonym for the nation-state in his unbound novel. David and Edith begin an affair that culminates in David’s leaving his wife and Beetlecreek for Edith and a life in the city. To David, Edith’s return “brought movement to his life (a life which had become static, caught in the creek reeds, turned rusty and muddy), had importance because it lifted the suffocation from him” (*Beetlecreek* 94). David’s articulation of a particular dominant performance of racial identity as suffocation

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<sup>129</sup> Hall notes the disturbing fact that the black gang members don black robes and masks calling for violence in “imitation of the Ku Klux Klan” (“Afterword” *Beetlecreek* 233).

recalls Berenice's commentary in *The Member of the Wedding* on being "caught" and "squeezed ... off in one corner by ourself" (119), and, in a different register, *The Bell Jar*'s Esther Greenwood's revelation of the "motherly breath of the [whites] suburbs" (113) as a form of death. In contrast to Margolies, who reads Edith "as a death figure, having been hardened and corrupted in the big-city Negro ghettos" (176), here, the narration describes her fierce, anti-hypocritical attitude toward Beetlecreek and its inhabitants as generating movement out of stagnation and homogeneity. Moreover, Edith's hardness, as she tells David, arose from being raped at age thirteen on her walk home by a white man (*Beetlecreek* 114). Though Edith and David leave Beetlecreek together, the novel takes care to avoid a utopic future for the couple; as their bus departs, a divide has already settled between them, leaving the reader with a sense of ambiguity in keeping with modernist literary practice and the novel's polyphonic registers.

Nevertheless, the stimulation motivated by Edith's presence and their affair, which is hinted at only in passing, awakens in David an awareness of the racialization of his past experiences. This poses a tension between art as the vehicle of individual transcendence and its irreducible rapport with embodiment and collectivity, recalling the discussion of Ellison's author function in Chapter One of this project. As an adolescent, David would walk miles to borrow library books related to painting so that he could emulate them in his own drawings. The result is that "for a little while he could forget that he was a Negro" (*Beetlecreek* 95). The narration figures social identity as heterogeneous, but relentlessly homogenized, for "up there in Pittsburgh it was being a kid first and it didn't make any difference that he was a Negro. But when he went to that

Negro college, he began to feel it, and along with it, the feeling of being suffocated and unable to move” (*Beetlecreek* 95). The narration maintains that this feeling of suffocation was not about a dearth of opportunities or ‘civil rights,’ but that it “had to do with Death, feeling frozen, suffocated, unable to breathe, knowing there was little to be done about it” (*Beetlecreek* 96). The only relief, for David, was in reading or looking at art books. He notices his college peers would rather engage in “goodtiming with girls or drinking” to escape what he believes they also feel as “being suffocated” (*Beetlecreek* 96). Written as the novel is in the late 1940s, prior to court-ordered integration, its 1930s narration gives voice to not only the material reality of segregation, but to its psychic effects: what David terms “the feeling of the death-grip” (*Beetlecreek* 96), which “would seem the most natural and permanent thing in the world” (97). The “death-grip” of American racism and the status quo of Jim Crow segregation enter into a compelling dialogue with Italian society, as Demby worked the entirety of the novel abroad, which was rebuilding itself in distinct opposition to fascism. Composed in the nightmare shadows of fascism and the Holocaust, and in view of the Ancient City, the novel worries deeply about critical thinking and acting in a counter-response to an oppressive dominant fiction.

Of his own role in the African American literary and artistic tradition, Demby recalls a visit to New York in 1956, where he received a call from Arna Bontemps, who told him: “Langston Hughes is here. Come with us to Carl Van Vechten’s place, so you can be photographed as a member of the Harlem Renaissance.” Demby concludes: “And that’s the last photograph Van Vechten took of anyone connected to the Harlem Renaissance. I was the end of the line” (Micconi 133). Though he was living abroad,



Demby saw his work as being in direct conversation with an African American literary tradition. His feeling of reaching the “end of the line,” translates into the dramatic shift in style and form that would characterize the black radical tradition of the 1960s at large, as I will later discuss in terms of Demby’s innovative second novel, *The Catacombs*, and its innovation as a harbinger of black postmodernism.

The critical success of Demby’s debut novel led to reporting opportunities for Italian periodicals like *Epoca* and American publications like *Harper’s* and *Holiday*. Demby traveled frequently throughout the 1950s, returning often to the United States. He traveled through the South, for instance, for *Reporter* magazine, where he profiled the grassroots organizing efforts of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in an 1956 article, “They Surely Can’t Stop Us Now.” The article profiles an African American pharmacist who fills orders, while balancing two phone lines dispatching rides for the impacted bus riders. The druggist speaks in code about “shooting marbles” and effects a “minstrel dialect” (18), in case his phone has been tapped by the police, as he suspects. Not long after his trip to the South, Demby visited Richard Wright in his Paris apartment overlooking the Rue Monsieur le Prince; the two discussed the Bandung Conference held in 1955 in the Republic of Java, and *The Color Curtain*, the piece that Wright wrote in response to the experience.<sup>130</sup> In a brief note, Demby recorded in his notebook that he and Wright shared the feeling that the Arab uprising in North Africa and the Montgomery Bus boycott were interrelated social revolutions. Demby refers to the anti-colonial battle

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<sup>130</sup> The Bandung Conference brought together African and Asian leaders from some 29 countries to address coalitional visions and strategies for bettering the lives of impoverished peoples. See Richard Wright *The Color Curtain* (1956/1994).

for independence in Algeria no less than ten times in *The Catacombs*, registering its centrality to the ecstatic times of the early sixties in his second novel.

While pursuing his craft as a novelist, and alongside his work in journalism, Demby earned a living in the fifties and sixties screenwriting and translating Italian scripts into English for studios like Cinecittà—the studio that gave rise to Rome being called the “Hollywood on the Tiber.” In the early 1950s, he met and married the Italian poet, novelist, screenwriter and translator, Lucia Drudi; the two moved into a bohemian neighborhood on Via Pompeo Magno in Rome, where they lived until they had their son, James, in 1955. At that point, they moved into a large apartment with Drudi’s mother in a bourgeois neighborhood near Rome’s Jewish Quarter and the Tiber River. This moving across class lines is significant for reading Demby’s work and his self-reflexive attitude toward having married into an artistic and politically-engaged, but decidedly bourgeois Italian family with aristocratic ties. Together with her sister, Gabriella, Lucia Drudi ran a literary agency out of the Dembys’ apartment that represented American writers’ work in Italy, such as John Steinbeck.<sup>131</sup> Gabriella was married to the successful Italian modern painter Toti Scialoja, with whom Demby became close friends. In the fifties, Demby began collecting and championing *avant-garde* artworks of Italian artists, many of who went on to international acclaim, such as experimental artist Mimmo Rotella, who created his *décollages* from movie posters scavenged around the city, and minimalist and

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<sup>131</sup> Demby published the article “Con Steinbeck a Roma di William Demby” in the Italian magazine *Epoca* 3.90 (Jun. 1952), shortly after Steinbeck’s visit to Rome. Steinbeck gifted Demby with an Oxford English Dictionary with an inscription about the craft of writing that is quoted in its entirety in *The Catacombs* (97).

conceptual artist, Francesco Losavio.<sup>132</sup> Demby's work in journalism and his interactions and collaborations with cutting-edge Italian artists and leftist filmmakers directly inform the style and form of Demby's second novel *The Catacombs*. *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs* live among and are infused with Demby's nonfiction, his screenwriting and his translation work in this period, challenging us to resist the hierarchies of genre and to read instead in ecstatic fashion.

#### A 'Janus-time': Filmic Strategies for Ecstatic Times in *The Catacombs*

Demby trailblazed a radical black postmodern aesthetic with his second novel, *The Catacombs*, which was written in Rome and New York, and published in English in 1965 on Pantheon, and in Italian in 1967 on Frassinelli, translated by his wife Lucia Drudi. Nevertheless, in spite of its impressive formal and stylistic innovations, *The Catacombs* remains largely under-discussed in critical discourse and accounts of black literary history. In relationship to the novel's imbrication with the film industry, in a bibliographical entry on Demby in *Contemporary African American Novelists* (1999), Peter Christensen asserts that "the relationship of *The Catacombs* to the Italian film industry demands attention it has not received" (125), then goes on to note a page worth of subtle plot and thematic connections between Demby's novel and Fellini's *La Dolce*

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<sup>132</sup> Both artists are mentioned in *The Catacombs*. The novel opens with an ode to Rotella's collages; later in the novel, Demby cites the poem Rotella wrote on the back of one of his pieces for "Bill" (210-11). Demby also includes in the novel the Introduction that he wrote to an 1962 exhibit of Losavio's work (91-92).

*Vita and 8 ½*, and with Antonioni's and Pasolini's films of the early 1960s. To date, however, no such study has been undertaken. This section gestures toward the fruitfulness of such an enterprise by exploring *The Catacombs*' engagement with filmic strategies of cinematic time, alongside its interest in the temporality of the daily news, as key features of the novel's critical intervention as a cutting-edge work of proto-feminism and black postmodernism.

While honing his craft as a novelist, Demby earned a living alongside his work in journalism by translating Italian scripts into English, acting, and screenwriting. His 1953 marriage to Lucia Drudi, who was herself a prolific screenwriter and translator, strengthened his already considerable ties to the industry and to neorealist and surrealist filmmakers. Demby earned a name for himself with his swift translations from Italian into idiomatic English. In addition to translating scripts, he also dabbled in theater and acting, playing the role of "Sam" in Camillo Mastrocinque's 1952 film, *Il Peccato di Anna*, a retelling of *Othello*, starring Demby's friend, African American actor, Ben Johnson, which was released in the US as *Anna's Sin* (1961). Demby collaborated with Fellini and Rossellini, serving as the assistant director of dialogue on the 1962 film *Europa 51*, starring Ingrid Bergman. In 1962, Demby was invited to MC a landmark episode of the television show *Il Delle Signore 21*, filmed at Rome's RAI-studios, featuring Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis, and Hazel Scott; Demby had the idea to call out in Italian, "Hey Louis, what's Harlem?" to which Armstrong responded, "Harlem is..." then launched into his set (Micconi 134-5). Some fifteen million Italians viewed the program. Demby wrote of the inspiring experience and its intercultural relevance in a

statement of his career highlights, stating, “I can only hope that it did much to correct a false image that most Italians had about Negroes in America.”

In 1961, Demby collaborated with his wife Lucia Drudi on the script of Giuseppe Bennati’s film *Congo Vivo*, starring Gabriele Ferzetti and Jean Seberg, which details the chaotic first days of decolonization in the Congo. Though the film attempts to address revolutionary foment by incorporating actual news footage, reviews considered this technique as contrived and secondary to the traditional romance plotline involving its European stars.<sup>133</sup> Demby and Drudi also scripted 1962’s *Marcia o Crepa*, directed by Frank Wisbar and released in the US as *Commando*, about the last days of the French Foreign Legion in Algeria. With its focus on a French Foreign Legion captain, played by Stewart Granger, the film’s gaze rests primarily on the position of the colonizer and his stalwart efforts to assert order out of chaos by arresting a FLN leader. In these ways, Demby’s interest in the anticolonial battle for independence in Algeria in *The Catacombs*, resonates more distinctly with Gillo Pontecorvo’s revolutionary film *Battle for Algiers* (1967), than with these studio films. Edward Said, in an essay about Pontecorvo, asserts that *The Battle of Algiers*, along with the director’s 1969 film *Burn!* are “the two greatest political films ever made” (283). In her reading of *The Battle of Algiers* as a manifesto for militancy, Clarissa Clò cites Leonard Katz’s *New York Post* articles from 1970, which revealed that the film was required viewing for all members of the Black Panther Party (206-7). Such correlations recall Demby’s conversation with Wright about the connectedness of the Algerian uprising with the black freedom struggle.

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<sup>133</sup> See Coates-Smith, Michael and Gary McGee. “*Congo Vivo*.” *The Films of Jean Seberg*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 61-65. Print.

Demby actively draws upon his immersion in the Italian film industry in *The Catacombs*, as the novel's metafictional, first-person narrator, "Bill Demby," cites meetings with directors, actresses, and writers throughout the text. In a 2011 interview, Demby emphasizes the impact of such experiences on his novelistic practice:

When I started writing *The Catacombs*, I couldn't get a hold on the novel; my scope was too big. At the time, the movie industry was what I was usually making my money from, translating film scripts very quickly, overnight. But by doing that I had also lost all control over any ideas I had about the nature of literature. So I decided to write a novel where I could do what I was doing in the movies: have a theme, a *soggetto*, follow the day's news, and accept the daily torture of writing, not just to produce but for the metaphysics of what I was doing. There is no shape to anything; the shape comes in the doing. (Micconi 133)

*The Catacombs*' metafictional narrator "Bill Demby" is an African American expatriate novelist living in Rome with his Italian wife and son, who becomes increasingly infatuated with the heroine of his novel, Doris, a young African American actress. The novel self-reflexively takes up a loss of mastery and authorial control, often using humor and self-deprecation. The novel operates by way of three layers: the character Bill Demby's daily activity of splicing together headlines culled from some fifteen newspapers during the period of 1962-64; these entries collide with his descriptions of his difficulty writing his novel about Doris; and these meditations, in turn, press against scenes from his novel within in the novel, which script Doris' affair with an Italian count.

Composed during and obsessed with the chaotic, ecstatic times of 1962-64, *The Catacombs* opens with an ode to the set of Rotella collages hanging in Demby's writing studio that dance in the morning sunlight "like gorgeous jungle flowers" (*The Catacombs* 3); again, Rotella fashioned his collages from torn posters he gathered from around the city. In the early sixties, he began collaging movie posters. Rotella's last works, from 2004, return to this period with the series, "Tribute to Marilyn"—the iconic significance of whose death comes up repeatedly in *The Catacombs*. The invocation of collage at the novel's outset as a dynamic or "dancing" art form introduces *The Catacombs'* incorporation of filmic montage as a mode of layering and collision that operates by way of a cutting into, rather than sequence. The content of the montage, nevertheless, is not without context or political charge. Rather, this method points to the interconnected nature of these global events with lived human experiences across a variegated spectrum of wealth and poverty, privilege and strife.

Demby's use of filmic montage as a mode of engaging the ecstatic times and their continual deferral of meaning appears in a representative entry from October 1962:

And the atomic aircraft carrier *Enterprise* is now in the pirate waters of the West Indies. And the morning newspapers cry 'Wolf!' (A wise man indeed was Aesop!): BLOCCO NAVALE A CUBA ... U.S. BARS WEAPONS TO CUBA ... LA NAVI CHE PORTINO ARMI SARANNO DIROTTATE ... APELLO A KRUSCHEV PER MANTENERE LA PACE ... 61 AFRICAN BISHOPS UNITE ON LITURGY... COUNCIL HARD ON POOR CLERGY... 18 YEARS FOR BRITISH ADMIRALTY

SPY ... 'SOLD HIS COUNTRY FOR CASH' ... FATHER OF  
DEFECTING SOLDIER WANTS A 'FACE TO FACE' TALK ...  
7 DIE FROM SMALLPOX IN JAKARTA, INDONESIA ... CHINA  
ADVANCE BRINGS NEHRU FREEDOM SPEECH ... ITALIAN  
PLATOON IN THE TYROL AMBUSHED, 1 WOUNDED ... REDS  
LEAVE UN MEETING OVER CHINA ... ARTIFICIAL  
INSEMINATORS THREATEN TO STRIKE ...

*Aristophane[s]! (The Catacombs 92-3; original italics)*

Here, the novel registers a surface encounter with events of global notoriety that collide indiscriminately across languages and with obscure and unnoticed news tidbits. The dangerous game of brinksmanship, for instance, commingles with the fomenting Tibetan freedom struggle, which is juxtaposed by the entry's end with a workers' strike. The passage culminates with the invocation of "Aristophane[s]!" which playfully engages the headline of these striking artificial inseminators, while also performing what Wai Chee Dimock has termed literature's connection to "deep time." Dimock defines her key term as a "set of longitudinal frames, at one projective and recessionary, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric" (3-4). In Demby's novel, the associative allusion to Aristophanes connotes the ancient Greek drama *Lysistrata*, in which a group of women band together to withhold all sexual activity from their men until they end the Peloponnesian wars. This reference finds ecstatic resonance in the quintessential slogan of the sixties, "Make love, not war!" Bill Demby's mapping of the times figures history as a mobile phenomenon in



a mode that resists synthesis and does nothing to evaluate the totality of the present. Instead, such global headlines are layered anew each day, in the manner of a never-ending montage. There is a sense of a narrative tapestry being woven (and unwoven), but that one will never behold a final design.

Demby's genre-crossing ecstatic exploration of the early sixties as a "Janus-time" (*The Catacombs* 135) registers the simultaneously backward and forward-looking phenomenon of subjective temporal experience and historiography. The novel critiques teleology, or what it calls in its opening pages, "the illusory motion, the dreamlike progression and progress" (*The Catacombs* 4), and repeats a kind of mantra, no less than seven times over the course of the novel, that its focus is on "time, always time." Demby's interest in the movement of time and temporality across genres warrants a brief summary of the shifting technologies and ideologies of time in the modern era and their manifestation in visual culture.

For centuries, the sundial was the primary tool for telling time and coordinating communal labor rhythms (Thompson 58-60); the sundial remained in common use well into the modern era, even as great clocks were installed in churches and public squares beginning in the thirteenth century. It is really though, in the last two hundred years, with industrialization and its attendant technologies, that mechanized time becomes ubiquitous. According to Stephen Kern's study *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, by the end of the nineteenth century, millions of clocks and watches were being manufactured each year. Amid the rise of capitalism and colonialist and imperialist expansion, the need to develop reliable and portable timepieces was directly linked to

naval expeditions: inventor John Harrison worked for decades to develop a precision timepiece, eventually perfecting a chronometer in the late 18th century that revolutionized sea travel. In the 19th century, market imperatives increasingly drove the need to standardize time; in particular, the push to implement a uniform Railway timetable is widely recognized as the impetus behind establishing standard world-time. The Prime Meridian Conference, held in Washington D.C. in 1884 and attended by 25 countries, established the Greenwich Observatory, renowned for its accurate measurements, as the site of the zero meridian and divided the earth into twenty-four timezones—its full implementation, however, took several decades, underscoring the socially-constructed nature of clock time (Kern 11-12).

When one observes the zero arc of the timezones running through the heart of the British Empire, it is clear how such aims to homogenize time and space were also tied to orienting the world toward the norms of Western modernity and civilization.

Accordingly, in *Time and the Other* Johannes Fabian asserts that the:

oppressive societies which we collectively and inaccurately call the West needed Space to occupy. More profoundly and problematically, they required Time to accommodate the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition). In short, *geopolitics* has its ideological foundations in *chronopolitics*. (Fabian 144; original emphases)

Fabian's comments indicate how the practice of homogenizing and universalizing time and space is aligned with the metaphysical tradition of presence, which operates by way

of binaries that privilege the colonizer while marginalizing those deemed as excessive others who are forever fixed in the there and then of another time and place.<sup>134</sup>

Stephen Kern identifies several compelling works of modern art that depict these shifting conceptions of time and temporality across the late nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century. Cezanne's still life painting *The Black Clock* (c. 1870), according to Kern, is the only of its era to feature a clock (22). The painting renders a black mantel clock, significantly, without hands, sitting atop a small table draped with a white cloth, alongside a large seashell, a vase, a teacup and a lemon. The painting privileges temporal markers of sensual experience: the pinkness of the shell, aligned with oceanic flow, and the ritual of tea-time. The clock without hands defamiliarizes the relentless encroachment of mechanized time in this era with its attentiveness to these objects associated with pleasure.

Kern does not find another clock in a work of art until Juan Gris' cubist painting *The Watch* (1912). Here, as Kern observes, the watch is rotated 90 degrees, it is missing a second hand, and two of its quadrants are obscured. Emphasizing perspectivism, this Cubist watch figures time as disjunctive and discontinuous (Kern 23), and so more aligned with temporalities than with unified historical time. In 1931, Dalí's incredible surrealist vision *The Persistence of Memory* depicts large pocket watches melting against a spare coastal landscape (Kern 23). In contrast to the orderly unfolding of clock time, temporality drapes itself over the surfaces it encounters—upon the barren limb of a

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<sup>134</sup> See Derrida's critique of metaphysics in *Of Grammatology*. Spillers makes a related point regarding the time of the other: "'ethnicity' in this case freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the affects of the Eternal" ("Mama's Baby" 66).

truncated tree, upon the edge of a rectangular surface, upon the dough-like flesh of a man's cheek. Dalí's soft clocks suggest that although every human being's sense of temporality shares datable relations to clock time it is never in full correspondence with it, for, as Einstein asserted in his revolutionary 1916 paper on the general theory of relativity, "every reference body has its own particular time" (qtd. in Kern 19). Heise aptly suggests that Dalí's clocks "symbolize the distortion of mechanic temporality in the workings of human consciousness and memory" (*Chronoschisms* 37). In turn, ants swarm on the gold case of a pocket watch in the painting, signaling decay and entropy, and posing a challenge to poetic odes to Time immemorial, what Benjamin calls "the history of the victors" ("Theses" VII).

*The Catacombs* self-reflexively calls attention to its own aesthetic project as one influenced by Cubistic representations of time (40). The novel engages countless temporalities, both personal and public, ancient and new, secular and religious. This attempt to see from multiple angles simultaneously performs a compression of time and space that takes on added sonic reverberations given *The Catacombs*' age of cinematic time and televised connectivity. Rotella's dancing *décollages* emblemize this aesthetic move from unified time to plural temporalities. As the character Bill Demby is framed anew each morning with his ritualistic readings of countless newspapers, he waits helplessly for his muse, the fictional Doris, to visit him in his studio, so he can continue writing the novel within the novel. With its use of metafictional and filmic strategies, *The Catacombs* remains ever-mindful of the seismic shifts in longstanding behavioral norms dictating race, class, gender and sexuality transpiring in this period, giving voice both to

black female empowerment and an attendant (Western) male anxiety. As Marianne DeKoven theorizes, the sixties saw the full realization, testing, and failure of modernity's utopian aims, which, in turn, gave way to postmodernity, with its ex-centric and minoritarian aesthetic moves.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, these movements remain entangled and imbricated with one another.

Resisting the Gaze, Playing with the Mask: *The Catacombs*' Doris as  
Black Female Spectator

In keeping with the novel's deployment of filmic strategies to engage ecstatic times, Doris is a young black American actress and dancer who has come to Rome to play a "Nubian Handmaiden" (*The Catacombs* 202) in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's epic film *Cleopatra*. *Cleopatra*, as James Hall observes, is the epitome of "a 'modern' production that seems to have everything and nothing to do with 'blackness'" (102). The film took over Rome, and with its elaborate sets and staging on the Appia Antica near the Catacombs, its budget grew exponentially from two to forty-four million dollars, which, in today's terms, would be in excess of 334 million dollars.<sup>136</sup> Demby and his wife Lucia Drudi were no strangers to historical epics, having written a full script of *Julius Caesar* for Lex Studios in 1960 that never, however, went into production. Adding much intrigue to *Cleopatra*'s colossal production was Elizabeth Taylor's high profile romance with her

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<sup>135</sup> See DeKoven *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (2004)

<sup>136</sup> See [imdb.com](http://imdb.com)

married co-star, Richard Burton, and her split from her own husband, Eddie Fisher. References to *Cleopatra* and ubiquitous celebrity gossip punctuate the text, but Demby's novel is *not at all* about Elizabeth Taylor's romance in Rome, nor about the iconic figure of Cleopatra; rather, it focuses firmly on Doris and her experience as a young African American female artist living in Rome during a time of dramatic social upheaval and change. It is a black female presence that serves as the narrator's interlocutor throughout the text, contributing to the novel's role as an innovator of radical black postmodernism.

*The Catacombs*' critical intervention emerges in its self-reflexive interest in Doris vis-à-vis the changing concept of woman as image. When Doris first appears in the novel in Bill Demby's studio for one of her "unpredictable visits" (*The Catacombs* 11), she is "shimmering" (11) like a filmic image in her full *Cleopatra* make-up. Bill Demby shares, "Though on several occasions I have tried to persuade her not to, she insists on wearing the grotesquely exotic [...] make-up she wears before the cameras; her hair-do, too, is authentically ancient Egyptian—a back-leaning cone" (*The Catacombs* 13). The overdetermined image of a character who shows up in costume when and looking how she pleases, subverts the notion of authorial control. Arriving in costume, Doris calls attention to her feminine masquerade of the exoticized *image* of the woman of color. Bill Demby self-reflexively embraces his loss of authorial control over form and content throughout the novel, playfully recalling Luigi Pirandello's 1921 metadrama *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (*The Catacombs* 45). Such a shift registers bell hooks' assertion that "if radical postmodern thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of 'authority' as 'mastery over' must not simply be a

rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter” (“Black Postmodernism” 2480).

Building on my reading of the importance of masquerade in *The Bell Jar* as a socio-cultural critique, I return here to Mary Ann Doane’s discussion of the female spectator of film. Doane emphasizes the gendered spectatorial binary of *proximity* as: female/to be looked at, and *distance* as: male/to look, concluding that “for the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image—she *is* the image” (231). In a related vein, Laura Mulvey explains, “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (62). As a critical method of destabilization, Doane turns to masquerade as a means of creating a gap between woman and the image, so that, “in flaunting femininity, it holds it at a distance” (81). Importantly, hooks expands this critical conversation by creating a space for the black female spectator—she asks: what of her look and its critical potential to add complexity to and disrupt the spectatorial binary by factoring race into considerations of the power differentials of *looking*, when the very act of looking has been cause for brutality and state-sanctioned violence against black men and women (“The Oppositional Gaze” 290-91). *The Catacombs* takes care to displace the Other’s gaze, questioning its underlying assumptions, as Doris repeatedly troubles the problematic pleasure afforded by voyeurism.

The Lacanian theorization of the screen and the mask further informs a reading of Demby’s filmic techniques and the role of masquerade as a critical strategy of resistance.

Kaja Silverman succinctly describes Lacan's theory of the screen "as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age and nationality" ("Fassbinder" 76). The screen necessarily mediates between the subject and the gaze of the Other, which assigns subjects their positions in the visual field. Lacan provocatively suggests, however, that "the human subject ... [is not] entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation" ("What is a Picture?" 107). Though the speaking subject is always situated within the bounds of the Symbolic Order, here, Lacan suggests that one might play with her role and her mask, reorienting the subject's relationship to the gaze. David Eng advocates for resisting the deterministic screen, or what Lacan terms the "given-to-be-seen," by "look[ing] awry" and "askew" (*Racial Castration* 37) at the image and text, for elided personal and collective histories. Returning to Doane's theorization of the masquerade, proceeding with critical distance affords subversive insights and opportunities for artistic play. An awareness of one's positionality hinges upon an acknowledgement of the interplay between one's subject formation and the social forces of race, class, gender, sexuality and religion that situate each subject in an ideological framework in such a way that makes one legible to others, often by way of stereotypes.

Doris recognizes her own function as an image, flaunting her role as a dancer and actress. She resists both the character Bill Demby's authorial gaze, regularly chastising



his possessiveness and prurience, just as she mocks the fetishistic desire of her lover, Count Raffaele, who tells her that their affair has released “the beast in him” (*The Catacombs* 67). The latter admission elicits Doris’ laughter and scorn; she schools Bill Demby and the Count about the fact that women of color are continually viewed as a site of an irreducible sexuality. Bill Demby remains in awe of his heroine, and increasingly ascribes his loss of authorial control to her; late in the novel, he describes “the feeling that I have had before that it is she who is vampirizing me, that it is she who is writing this book...” (82). In this way, the novel operates as an impressive work of proto-feminism, its composition underway and completed co-terminously with *The Bell Jar*’s 1963 pseudonymous publication—where the pseudonym recalls the female author’s decision to don a mask, to sign her novel in disguise.

In flaunting her feminine appeal in the novel, Doris “holds it at a distance” (Doane 81); we are made aware, in turn, of woman’s role *as* image. She instructs Bill about the radical implications of Marilyn Monroe’s suicide as a kind of Christ-figure:

What’s so funny about Marilyn Monroe being Christ? I mean she made people sit up and take notice. She made people *feel* something about women [...] making people think what a *woman* is. Not going to bed with a woman. You men know what a man is because you got Christ, [...] Marilyn got herself crucified so everybody’d start thinking what a woman is [...] and] now after Marilyn Monroe’s sacrifice [...] We women can *identify!* ... I mean, for the first time in my life, I’m digging Christianity. (71-2; original italics)

Invoking the deep time of the Catacombs' Christian martyrs, Doris contemplates the iconic significance of Monroe's death in 1962 as an early martyr of the as-yet unrealized 1960s, and the ongoing struggle for women's emancipation. Sylvia Plath's suicide was not long to follow.

The novel actively addresses the rising momentum of feminism and decolonization by way of its postmodern pastiche of headlines and blurbs, sometimes citing entire articles. For instance, the novel includes an editorial by Italian feminist filmmaker, Lorenza Mazetti, published in the wake of the suicide of her friend, a young West Indian woman living in Rome and married to an Irish poet. The text of the article assigns blame for her friend's death to her overbearing husband, who punished his wife in subtle ways as he was struggling to define his own masculinity in an age of shifting gender roles. Mazetti's article, as James Hall also notes (104), concludes the chapter and so is left without direct commentary from Bill Demby, allowing Mazetti, in effect, to speak for herself and on behalf of her late friend. Another related instance occurs in the novel within the novel, when the philandering Count pays a visit to his wife, Adelaide, who is well aware of her husband's affair with the now-pregnant Doris. She mentions an idea she has to make a movie of their life, to which he asks, "Do you mean to finance it?" She asserts, "No ... *make it!*" (153; original emphasis). An emphasis on women's critical distance, and as creators of culture, infuses the times of the novel.

With its interest in cinematic time, visuality and the image, *The Catacombs* anticipates bell hooks' question: where is the black female spectator? *The Catacombs'* self-reflexive moves are primarily achieved through Doris' character, whose scripted

scenes with the Count engage both the utopic possibilities and the failings of the sixties. The novel's arbitrary assemblages of global headlines showcase history-making as a discursive production mobilized by practices of narrativizing, involving exclusivity and selectivity.<sup>137</sup> Demby's novel is a harbinger of postmodern literary and art movements to come. Hall, who reads Demby's novel as "anti-modern" (rather than postmodern), asserts that "Demby is not so much out of step with the stream of African-American writing in the mid-sixties that seeks to celebrate 'blackness' and violate the hegemony of the American literary mainstream, as he is, rather, expansive of that location [and...] internationalizes the conversation" (108-9). Like Hall, I read Demby's work as both imbedded in 1960s African American literature and as attentive to the importance of such a movement to the Janus-time(s) of global flux and struggle (*The Catacombs* 135).

Resonating with the ecstatic times that Demby juxtaposes in *The Catacombs*, is *Boccaccio '70*: a 1962 work of four short films by Italian directors De Sica, Fellini, Monicelli and Visconti. The film's second act is Federico Fellini's, "The Temptation of Dr. Antonio" ("Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio"), which follows a repressed clergyman Dr. Antonio who makes it his business to root out, disrupt, and excoriate any sign of licentiousness in Rome. To his utter outrage, an enormous billboard, ostensibly advertising milk, is erected directly across from his apartment, featuring the Swedish actress and sex symbol Anita Ekberg—of the famed scene in *La Dolce Vita* (1960)

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<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of historiography as performative, see Sara Marzioli. "The Subterranean Performance of History Between Harlem and Rome in William Demby's *The Catacombs*." *African American Review* 47.2-3 (2014): 417-429.

wherein she wades into and luxuriates in Rome's Trevi fountain.<sup>138</sup> In *Boccaccio '70*, in the midst of the billboard's installation, a bus pulls up and a group of African American jazz musicians pile out and begin playing and dancing, much to the gathering crowd's delight. This juxtaposition marks the return of the repressed: both the sexualized woman as image and American jazz stand in for pleasure—the latter was forbidden under Mussolini's regime but gained incredible popularity in the postwar period, particularly in the 1950s. In concert with this sonic display, the camera pans slowly over the billboard, which features Anita's figure in repose. She is clad in a long black velvet gown and a glass of milk rests near her cleavage; a neon sign at the top of the ad implores viewers to "*Bevete Piu Latte!*" Drink More Milk! The crowd cheers with delight, responding to both the sights and sounds that solicit them.

Dr. Antonio does his utmost to have the sign dismantled, appealing to the board of censors, to no avail. In a surreal episode later in the piece, Dr. Antonio visits the billboard in the middle of the night. To his horror, the billboard becomes animate and Anita assumes various poses before ultimately stepping out of the ad, monstrously large, and free to roam around the city at night. In a parodic reversal of 1933's *King Kong*, in which Kong holds the scantily clad Ann Darrow in his grip, here, it is Anita who picks up the clergyman, the ambassador of censorship and repression, the policeman of pleasure, and holds him in her grasp like an powerless insect. Fellini's playful tale, like Demby's novel, engages Doane's question, "What, then, of the *female* spectator?" (230). In this sense, Anita animates her own image, flaunting her embodiment, now gigantic, and so returns

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<sup>138</sup> Incidentally, Demby scrawled a note for an idea for a film starring Ekberg as Eve.

the male look, disrupting its pleasure and inciting awe, even shame and inadequacy. Here, Anita's feminine masquerade calls attention to the fundamental structures of repression that support the fetishization of the image, and signals the complex interplay between the political and sexual revolutions of the 1960s.

Such resistance is not unrelated to Doris' role in *The Catacombs*, again anticipating and engaging hooks' question, what of the black female spectator? In a handwritten note about the novel, William Demby considered having Bill Demby and Doris go to see *Cleopatra* at the end of the novel. In this scenario, Doris could look awry at her own image on screen. Translating the potential of masquerade into self-reflexive mimicry, Doris performs her femininity with ironic panache throughout the text, staking her own creative claim.<sup>139</sup> Though Doris becomes pregnant, and is unsure whether the baby is the result of her dalliance with Bill Demby, or whether it is the Count's, no child is born. The novel stages its final scene in the depths of the Catacombs, a scene of deep ambiguity, with the Count groping for the lost Doris, or rather the lost image of Doris. This underground ending, which invokes radical narratives by Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison, registers the unknown outcomes of the 1960s' revolutionary energies, as women and people of color sought liberation from the material and psychic effects of oppression.

The explosive currents of the Algerian war, President John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Cuban Missile crisis, and the March on Washington, among countless other events, are presented both as the ultra-now of 1962-64 in the novel—but also, simultaneously, as bearing a relationship to a long view of historical cycles. In a letter

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<sup>139</sup> See Carole-Anne Tyler's discussion of masquerade and mimicry in *Female Impersonation* (27-8), as discussed in Chapter Two's reading of *The Bell Jar*.

home to her mother, Doris writes, “here in Rome you get a historical perspective about things, you take the long view of history but you can’t find out anything about your own place in current history” (99). With an emphasis on displacement, the novel demonstrates how the beckoning future comes to us in the present by way of the racialized past. This literary display of ecstatic temporality incorporates a filmic aesthetic that juxtaposes revolutionary times with a long view of history. Demby’s meta-critical enlistment of the *long durée* enriches our conceptions of black diasporic art, and anticipates black postmodernism in the playful, but always searing work of such later writers as Ishmael Reed and Fran Ross. The early 60s emerge as a period rife with pleasure and pain, optimism and skepticism, rewarding, like Demby’s fiction, our continued meditations.

### The ‘Enigmatic Excess’ of Demby’s *King Comus*

I turn now to Demby’s final, as-yet unpublished novel *King Comus* in the mode of a beginning, rather than an ending, for “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” (*Invisible Man* 6). The novel’s protracted writing time of over twenty-five years recalls Ellison’s unbound novel’s extended composition time of nearly forty years, which ended only with his passing. Demby composed *King Comus* during his years living in Tuscany from the mid-1980s to 1997, and upon his return to Sag Harbor, where he spent his last years. Unlike Ellison, Demby declared his 185-page novel finished—the manuscript’s final page reads “The End, Sag Harbor, N.Y., May 29. 07” (*King Comus* TS 187). Though the author signed his text in 2007, dating and locating it in time and space, is a

text “finished” before it is read by a public? Does a text first require publication to come into being? As Demby’s fourth, out of print novel *Blue Boy* (1980) demonstrates, publication is not a guarantee of circulation and reception. Though Demby remarked that he never saw a copy *Blue Boy* novel in print, this peculiar biographeme did not appear to trouble him; that is, he did not seem to worry about possessing the published version of this work released on Knopf Doubleday, a major imprint. Such a philosophy loosens the grip of authorial ownership over the text that the author function works to secure. This turn from product to process infuses *King Comus*’ own overdetermined condition and further extends this project’s consideration of the posthumous text’s ecstatic qualities.

Dwelling as it does in the liminal time-space between what we might typically deem as finishedness, as signified by “The End,” and unpublishedness, or the text that is not-yet in circulation, *King Comus* resists being read according to our normative practices. When faced with an excessive text, the impulse of the critic, particularly in the case of posthumously published texts, is often to decipher and determine the work’s meaning by way of the author function. But with Demby’s place in literary history remaining productively indefinite, we are poised instead to engage *King Comus*, assuming the novel’s futural release, with possibility and plurality as our operative modes of interpretation. An ecstatic reading and writing practice embraces the questions raised by “the aesthetic principle of the work’s survival, its perpetuation beyond the author’s death and its enigmatic *excess* in relation to him” (Foucault 105; original emphasis), and resists the processes that might aim to reify this yet-to-be novel upon the occasion of its posthumous publication and circulation. The posthumous text, as this project has

explored, eludes such capture with its ecstatic excess, even as it makes room for its author's poignant return by way of the biographemic.

The posthumous text's vulnerable status necessitates the labor and care of others to usher it into the world. In 2004, journalist Jeff Biggers published "Postcard from Tuscany: William Demby Has Not Left the Building," a poignant profile of the writer that predicted Demby's fifth and final novel would be a literary event that would capture the attention of the New York publishing world and engage a new generation of readers. When Demby passed away on May 23, 2013 at the age of 90, however, *King Comus* novel had still not found a publisher. When I read Demby's obituary in the *New York Times* in 2013, and learned of the existence of his final novel, I could not fathom its unpublished status.<sup>140</sup> This did not strike me as the "last word" in the extraordinary life of a radical novelist. How could it be that such an innovative author, who had been honored with an Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006, and who, along with Paule Marshall, was said to have written "one of the two most important black novels of the sixties," did not find a publisher for his final work?<sup>141</sup> Demby's posthumous legacy demonstrates that texts are never accidents—they enter into the world only by way of material circumstances, most often driven by the mainstream literary marketplace, and influenced by the politics of literary reputation and canonization.

Locating the manuscript of *King Comus* entailed an inquiry into the details that were available about the author's life—the obituary serving as a microcosm and

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<sup>140</sup> See William Yardley, "William Demby, Author of Experimental Novels, Dies at 90"

<sup>141</sup> See Robert Bone 1969 Rev.; other Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement winners include: Paule Marshall, Ralph Ellison, William Melvin Kelley, and Adrienne Kennedy.



metonym of each life's variegated unknowable journey. Even as the other signs our name to our obituary in the end, authoring our life in succinct fashion, this posthumous gesture is prone to slippage, for each concise detail holds the potential to branch off into a narrative with multiple incarnations, each of which is subject to interpretation and revision. Such details and their subtexts led me, however circuitously, to Demby's domestic, uncatalogued postwar archive. This posthumous archive and the publication prospects for Demby's posthumous novel *King Comus* afford and require collaboration for their maintenance and accessibility, emblemizing the affective sociality engendered by the posthumous circulation of the late author's work.

Resisting the standard approach to view late style and final works as a culmination or resting point that the author's death seems to confirm, I read *King Comus*' uncertain status in the world at the meta-level as defying a causal timeline and teleology, and its thematics as performing the dynamics of deep historical time and the ecstatic nature of embodied temporality. The novel operates by way of three imbricated timeframes: the titular story of the virtuoso musician and escaped slave, King Comus, which is set in the early nineteenth-century plantation South; the World War II experiences in training and in Italy of two African American servicemen, one of whom is a descendent of King Comus; and the unusual reunion in the mid-1990s in Italy of these servicemen and their scheming white commanding officer, as they plan a gospel summit in Rome at the site of Constantine's vision of the cross. Of the novel's expansive timeframe, Demby explains, "I had to go back to Constantine to save myself, before Christianity, before Islam, a world yearning and primed for a new wave of belief"

(Biggers). This ambitious take on “deep time” signals Demby’s sustained narrative investment in a transnational and diasporic literary response to human suffering and struggle registered in and across historical time and through subjective temporality.

In concert with its indeterminate status as a yet-to-be published novel, the narrative project of *King Comus* continually characterizes itself as contingent and unreliable. Like *The Catacombs*, *King Comus* introduces a metafictional narrator, “D.” Such a move calls attention to narrativizing practices and highlights the gap between the author and his text. D., recalling Borges’ poem, “Borges y yo.” The narrator D. apologizes in the opening pages: “But forgive me for I am rambling and the truth is I don’t know quite how to proceed, for I am an ant traveling over one of those enormous Tapestries of time” (2). Such a metaphor allows for the temporal experience of the subject, the ant, even as the image of the tapestry signals fabrication, that of the narrative’s warp and woof, as its players are woven into affiliative relations with one another by circumstance and across the expanse of deep time. The slippage between the author William Demby and the narrator D. performs a ceding of authorial control and the modernist conceit of mastery to the forces of the imagination and its unconscious, both personal and collective. In keeping with this dissertation project’s interest in questioning the logic and limits of the author as an originator/father figure and the text as his progeny, *King Comus*’s thematics figure ancestry as unverifiable, even mystical, and emphasize instances of cultural and racial hybridity as pervasive, rather than exceptional. Chronology and truth-telling are continually called into question and dismissed as Tillman, an African American serviceman, imparts to D. the oral history of his fabled

ancestor, King Comus, during the men's fraught WWII service in a segregated unit. Adding another layer of formal complexity, Tillman's tale is imbedded within D.'s own ecstatic telling of past events and their bearing on an unknown future. At the meta-level, *King Comus*' status as a yet-to-be novel signals the posthumous text's ecstatic virtues, which operate in the endless mode of becoming. This mode resides in the text's orality, which operates by way of repetition, but also by embellishment and panache.

In contrast to the logic of the "great authors" paradigm, which would strive to recuperate Demby as a lost or undiscovered literary icon, I point instead to his dynamic rapport with other authors pushing the limits of time and space by way of their engagement with the racialized past and the beckoning future. Demby's novel features characteristics of both the neo-slave narrative and time travel narrative, keeping literary company with Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Octavia Butler's Afro-futurist novel *Kindred* (1979), as well as with more recent neo-slave narratives such as Ernest Jones' *The Known World* (2003) and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), to name just a few affiliative connections. Akin to William Melvin Kelley's mid-century novel *A Different Drummer* (1952), *King Comus*' narrative engages in a direct and radical confrontation with the racialized past. Demby's novel emphasizes fraught intersections between the experiences of Europeans and European Americans with that of Africans and African Americans. The novel stages the agonistic struggle for recognition and against white supremacy, and is deeply invested in questions of power, complicity, and the performativity of social identity, especially under duress or coercion. Nevertheless, like *The Catacombs* and *Love Story Black*, the novel regularly shifts tonal registers, sliding

betwixt the dead seriousness of physical and rhetorical violence wielded against those deemed as excessive others, and the comic and absurd.

*King Comus*' distinct but inextricable timeframes signal Demby's complex, intertextual meditations upon race and recognition throughout his published *oeuvre*. Demby's writing opens a productive space for thinking about this dissertation's broader concerns with race, class, gender, sexuality and authorship, in terms of national belonging, historical time, and ecstatic temporality. Such narrative moves find resonance in Demby's literal moves back and forth between the US and postwar Italy, signaling the heterogeneity of being in this crucial era of social flux and struggle. As a yet-to-be published novel, this ecstatic text demonstrates the beckoning potentiality of the futural, even as it gestures back to the centuries that comprise its ecstatic settings and thematics, and to the decades that compose its writing time. *King Comus* manifests the radical incompleteness of all acts of signification and the invitation such incompleteness poses for boundless meaning-making.

## Conclusion

In August of 1963, William Demby returned to the United States to participate in Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington with his sister and father: an experience that informs key passages in *The Catacombs*, in which "Bill Demby" marches in and meditates upon the event's scope and its mediatization. As they enter D.C. on a bus, Bill Demby compares the deserted streets to "the stylized set for a Civil War movie" (*The Catacombs* 173). Bill Demby, who thinks how only yesterday he was in Rome, does not

yet “feel part of this well-groomed well-behaved revolution,” which feels like a “public relations stunt” (177). He describes “photographers and TV cameramen perching on hastily erected platforms of iron tubing, ‘historifying’ the Event” (178). Bill Demby meditates that his grandfather sold sweet potatoes from a cart on the “slum streets of Philadelphia,” while his own son is an Italian schoolboy who will watch the march on tomorrow’s television programming in Rome. He thinks then of his own father beside him, “And here we are, father and son *in the presence, in the present*, marching” (178; original emphasis). This ecstatic moment demonstrates the entrance of the past into the present by way of the future. Time simultaneously converges and disperses. The marchers are swept along in the crowd until “suddenly it doesn’t seem real, there are too many people, I haven’t the slightest idea what we are doing here, where we are going. *To a tomb?* (179; original emphasis). The spectacularized and mediatized image of African American men and women marching *en masse* through the streets in the heart of the nation’s power structure is refracted through the perspective of a metafictional protagonist who questions his ability to speak for collective experience even as he is moved to take part, to act. The narration gives voice to the sixties as alternately, if not simultaneously, utopic and apocalyptic.

Unlike the posthumous publications I have discussed in this project thus far: Ellison’s second novel, which he began in the mid-50s; Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, which she began in the late fifties; or McCullers’ autobiography, which was also initiated in the late fifties; the drafting of Demby’s *King Comus* began in the mid-1980s, but its ecstatic narrative energy springs backwards and forwards from its World War II narrative. The

concept of the ecstatic subject recurs throughout this project, both in terms of the experiences of literary characters—Ellison’s Bliss/Sunraider, Plath’s Esther Greenwood, McCullers’ Frankie Addams, Demby’s Doris, among others, but also in the life experience of these authors, who advance, in particularized ways, subversive social commentary and critique by means of their defamiliarizing cultural productions. Compellingly, all of the authors discussed in this project spent considerable time in postwar Europe: Ellison was on fellowship at the American Academy in Rome from 1955-57; Plath stayed on in London until her death, following her move there for a 1956 Fulbright; McCullers spent months in Rome on multiple occasions, and lived for a time both in and near Paris in the late 1940s and early 50s; but of these authors, only Demby moved to Europe permanently, marrying an Italian writer, Lucia Drudi, acquiring fluency in Italian, and working in film and journalism. His unique experiences and cultural immersion infuses his writing with a rich critical distance about which there remains much more to say. All of these crossings signal a heterogeneity of experience that moves the parameters of American literature beyond national borders and the narratives that strive to maintain them.

Demby’s cultural contributions, both in fiction and nonfiction, in the mid-century and beyond, have great relevance for adding significant nuances to black literary history and for probing the continued role of the imagination and artistic production in effecting social transformation and social justice. By emphasizing Demby’s extraordinary but under-researched life and work, my aim is to situate him within a broader transnational and diasporic context and artistic network. Demby looked to Italy with its proximity to

Africa, where he travelled to multiple countries, as a vibrant artistic and political milieu in which to hone and express his multi-dimensional artistic talents. Though Demby was away from the American scene during the height of the black freedom struggle, his work was never far from the aims of the black radical tradition, nor its resonances with other parts of the world. Avant-garde and revolutionary texts of this period imagined new and heterogeneous modes of being for men and women, even if these modes were not always commensurate with lived reality, particularly for women and people of color. Demby's role in the literary history of this period and beyond and the afterlives of his texts are still unfolding toward the plural promise of the future.

## Conclusion

### The Ecstatic Mid-Century

In Carson McCullers' 1958 dictaphone sessions, or "experiments," with Dr. Mary Mercer, she recounts a story that her friend Carol Saroyan told her about when she first met her husband William Saroyan. Saroyan's play *The Time of Your Life* (1939) had just won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and he was going off to fight in World War II. Carol was intimidated to write letters to a *writer*. She was living at that time with her friend Oona O'Neill, daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill, who herself was receiving "beautiful letters" from her beau, a soldier; the two women would read and relish his letters together each day. Carol and Oona decided that Carol should copy the letters and send them as her own to Saroyan: "[Oona] would read the letters out loud, and Carol would lie on the floor on her belly, and write the phrases one after another in her own handwriting" (Experiment 7 Page 5). Once Carol sent them, however, the effect was not at all what the women had desired; when Carol visited Saroyan at boot camp, he told her that he no longer loved her, as he thought he did. When she pressed him for answers, he revealed it was because of her *letters*. The two were eventually reconciled and went on to marry, and Oona went on to marry another man, Charlie Chaplin.<sup>142</sup> Saroyan was reading a book one day aboard Chaplin's yacht and began to laugh aloud, declaring that a letter by a man called J.D. Salinger was "one of the loveliest letters" he had ever read—"it is so funny, so wonderfully funny." Carol replied, "Well the first time you read any of his writing you didn't think it was very funny," finally revealing the author of her letters.

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<sup>142</sup> The Saroyans, like the McCullers, married twice and split up twice (Experiment 7 Pages 4-5).



Once we send a text into the world, we can no longer account for its reception, nor the purposes to which it may be put and interpreted in future contexts. In this anecdote, Carol Saroyan masquerades as J.D. Salinger, but her missives misfire. Though she signs her letters, she cannot ensure their reception by Saroyan, who rejects them, sensing that they are not in her “own” voice. This is not to imply the possibility of an *a priori*, authentic letter that Carol chooses not to, or does not, write, but points instead to the Derridean concepts of iterability and citationality. The imitative and iterable aspects of genre, here of the epistolary tradition, are also conditioned by wartime narratives of sacrifice and fidelity. Such characteristics run through Carson McCullers’ own wartime correspondence with Reeves McCullers—letters, however, which often arrived sporadically, out of the order in which they were written, or sometimes not at all. Such correspondence registers the spatial and temporal gaps that propel the sign’s inherent slippage, or *différance*. The emphasis in McCullers’ account again is on the social, as Oona O’Neill dictates Salinger’s letters to Carol Saroyan, and McCullers dictates this tale anew to Dr. Mary Mercer, (re)contextualizing it as a ray of light during McCullers’ period of darkest night glare. Her dictation, taken down by another, moves now in new contexts as part of an archive.

The above anecdote performs the loss of authorial control and the slippage of the signature that runs through this project about the material and conceptual effects of posthumousness. Try as he might, the author cannot regulate how his words go out into the world and operate, cited as they might well be in ever-shifting and often unknowable contexts—a feature flaunted by the intertextuality and citationality of postmodern

pastiche, film and literature. Speech, as well as dictation, like writing, is not the site of presence or plenitude, but always a citational, iterable act, subject to change and (re)interpretation.

Upon his passing in 2010, the famously reclusive J.D. Salinger—who ceased publishing in the 1960s, though he continued to write—purportedly left behind a series of works to be released posthumously, according to a timetable that he left in code in a locked vault.<sup>143</sup> The works, whose posthumous releases are reported to begin in 2015, include manuscripts related to: the family history of Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who, like *The Bell Jar*’s Esther Greenwood in the 1953 setting of Plath’s novel, is institutionalized on the brink of acceding to heteronormative adulthood; the Glass family of his short stories and *Franny and Zooey* (1961); and Salinger’s World War II service and interest in the Vedanta religion. Compellingly, this twenty-first century work, like the texts examined in this project, springs back to the postwar period in ecstatic fashion. This scenario rehearses the author’s desire to assert his wishes from beyond the grave, escaping publicity and criticism in the process, but at the same, demonstrating a wish for the work (and his signature) to *be* in the world. But as McCullers’ poem asks, “Do the dead know?”<sup>144</sup> Though such a plan still requires an other to execute the late author’s instructions, the author’s signature seeks to assert itself.

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<sup>143</sup> This is according to biographers David Shields and Shane Salerno, who wrote *Salinger*. NY: Simon and Schuster. 2013. Print. Salerno directed the documentary *Salinger* (2013), which ends with a forecasting of these posthumous publications. Dir. Shane Salerno. Story Factory. Film.

<sup>144</sup> From McCullers’ 1952 poem “The Mortgaged Heart”

The issues related to temporal gaps between composition and publication, the slippage of the authorial signature, and the demands of the proper subject contemplated in this project are not exclusive to posthumously published work. In early 2015, news came that author Harper Lee, now 88, would release *Go Set a Watchman*, a novel she composed some sixty years ago. Like the renown that Ellison garnered for his National Book Award-winning debut novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), Lee achieved critical and commercial success with her debut novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. When Lee's lawyer discovered the draft of *Go Set a Watchman*, apparently attached to the back of a manuscript draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee was approached about publishing the novel. This situation has many temporal aspects: Lee wrote *Go Set a Watchman* before writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *Go Set a Watchman* is set in the 1950s, some twenty years *after* the events narrated in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; responding to her editor's praise regarding the flashbacks devoted to Scout's childhood in *Go Set a Watchman*, Lee went on to rework the project with this Depression-era setting, and published it as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published in 1960, during a crucial period of the black freedom struggle, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s Depression-era setting in Maycomb, Alabama, like McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Demby's *Beetlecreek* (1950), witnesses the material and psychic effects of Jim Crow segregation, drawing important parallels to the radicalism of the 1930s and the 1960s. Such temporal complexity at both the diegetic and meta-textual levels demonstrates the presence of the racialized past in the present and its always mobile relationship to an unknown futural horizon.

*Go Set a Watchman*'s complex relationship to Lee's author function highlights many of this project's key engagements with temporal complexity and excess, and its critiques of the authorial signature, presence, and the proper subject. In spite of Lee signing her own text and affirming her wishes to see the novel published, scores of articles questioned Lee's decision and speculated that she had been manipulated.<sup>145</sup> It seems that the signature, signed belatedly, that is, so long after the scene of writing, and with the hand of an elderly woman—described repeatedly in coverage as having short term memory loss, vision and hearing impairment—is suspect. The authorial signature's capacity to authorize work for publication as a semantic anchor comes unmoored in the face of such ethical questions—many of which were raised by Lee's admirers, who questioned whether this long lost text would, in fact, detract from or compromise her solidified literary reputation.

Such responses speak to the homogenizing effect of the author function, which works to curtail excess in order to present a coherent portrait of the author that is both marketable and seemingly knowable. Paradoxically, nevertheless, the author function is also the means by which uncertain texts and circumstances, as in the instance of Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*, are rejected when a new or undecidable aspect threatens to unsettle the familiar contours of the author's *oeuvre* and reputation. This project's interest in the (impossible) desire to (re)align the posthumous text with its author takes on further complexity when the author herself, still living, is not able to fully convince us of her wishes, because of her age and bodily frailty.

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<sup>145</sup> See Serge F Kovalski. "One Agency in Harper Lee Inquiry Ends Its Role, Saying Author is 'Aware' of Book Deal." *NY Times*. 12 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Mar. 2015.

Salinger's rumored posthumous releases and Lee's fraught release of her 1950s novel, share company with William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac's co-authored novel, *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*. In another striking temporal gap that amplifies the text's thematics, their novel was written in 1945, but was not published until 2008. The text, which was considered a "lost" manuscript for many years, fictionalizes the events surrounding the emerging Beat circle and their friend Lucien Carr's stabbing to death of an older man, David Kammerer, who was enamored of Carr for many years. The chapters alternates between two first-person narrators: Burroughs/"Will Dennison" and Kerouac/"Mike Ryko." This dialogical structure underscores a splitting that pervades the text's core traumatic event and its juridical and psychic aftermath. The shared signature of this text implicitly engages matters of same-sex male desire, as *Hippos* traces the surveillance of self and other, and physical and rhetorical violence. The novel is absorbed with an overdetermined sense of national belonging, as prior to the murder, Mike and Phillip, the semi-autobiographical characters representing Jack Kerouac and Lucien Carr, obsessively try to enlist in the merchant marine so that they can sail to France together in order to escape their romantic entanglements with women and make their way to Paris. Homosociality emerges as simultaneously attractive and repulsive in the text: it is at once a utopic context, shorn of (female) domesticity, and an unlivable position, as Phillip's stabbing to death of Ramsay Allen, Kammerer's fictional counterpart, lays bare the violent prohibition against the expression of homoerotic desire.

Burroughs' and Kerouac's estates released the collaborative manuscript only after all parties involved, including the authors, had died. Such a posthumous release recalls both Dr. Mary Mercer donating the 1958 transcripts of her sessions with Carson McCullers to Columbus State University upon her death, and Ted Hughes' trunk at Emory University, which is to remain sealed until his wife's death. What does it mean that controversial events and difficult material may be disseminated *after* the principal parties' deaths? What does such a move assume about our connection to the material world following our demise? In the case of *Hippos* and McCullers' dictaphone experiments, what does it signal about attitudes toward queer desire? Again, "Do the dead know?" Such archival moves suggest that they do not. The formation of Burroughs' and Kerouac's respective author functions was subsequent to this co-authored text. A consideration of this collaborative project sheds new light on Burroughs and Kerouac's shared tendency to fictionalize the autobiographical, and registers intertextual resonances with Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1958). Approaching this text from the vantage of collaborative authorship productively loosens the author function's control over the text—the Romantic perception of the author being incredibly strong in Kerouac's case—affording biographemic insight into these authors' life experiences and their texts' subversion and reimagining of the postwar national imaginary.

The postwar imaginary was shaped in particular ways for writers of color, whose wartime experience was undeniably conditioned and coerced on the basis of race, ethnicity and sex. John Okada's landmark novel *No-No Boy* (1957) trailblazed a

precedent for literary dissent to the injustice of Japanese internment. Written following the author's internment at Camp Minidoka and his subsequent WWII service in the military as a translator, *No-No Boy* undoes the binary logic of the loyalty oath, as Okada explores the heteroglossic excess and myriad positions formed in response to what had been framed to internees as a clear cut, "yes or no" loyalty questionnaire regarding military service.<sup>146</sup> Because of the direct questions it poses about national belonging and its exclusionary logic, *No-No Boy* remained an obscure text for over a decade following its 1957 Cold War era publication. The novel was recovered "in some J-Town San Francisco bookstore in 1970" (Okada iii) by Jeff Chan amid the radical formation of Asian American literary studies, and has since become a foundational work.

What of John Okada's posthumous legacy? Okada described the premise of and his plans for a second novel in a 1956 letter to his publisher as the story of an immigrant Issei: "a story which has never been told in fiction and only in fiction can the hopes and fears and joys and sorrows of people be adequately recorded" (Okada 257). Tragically, Frank Chin and Lawson Inada discovered that Okada's widow had burned the manuscript of Okada's second novel in the wake of Okada's untimely death at age 47, after UCLA's

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<sup>146</sup> More than 120,000 persons of Japanese descent living on the West Coast, two-thirds of who were American-born citizens, were interned on the basis of Executive Order 9066, signed by Roosevelt just months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. All internees over seventeen were administered a loyalty questionnaire in the presence of army recruiters, incongruously titled, "Application for Leave Clearance." The prisoners' answers to the questionnaire's infamous questions 27 and 28 determined whether draft-age male internees would serve in segregated combat battalions and as translators in the US military: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered? Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign power or organization?" (Selective Service Form 304A). Those who answered negatively, were branded "No-No Boys" and incarcerated in high-level security sites.

Japanese American Research Project expressed no interest in the late author's papers. Okada's second novel witnesses the author looking further back into the past, rather than forward, for insight into the manifold complexity of the Japanese American experience. The material and psychic effects of internment delineated in *No-No Boy* were far from resolved in the postwar period, elucidating how our sense of personal and collective temporality are intertwined. Okada's *No-No Boy*'s excavation of the past's "wreckage" (Benjamin 257) interrogates the nation-state's claims to American innocence, allowing for a refashioned, though hardly conciliatory, relationship to the injurious racialized past. Such a radical text is in dialogue with the ashes of Okada's second novel, which signifies posthumously in its absence.

The texts contemplated in this project and described in this conclusion foreground the extent to which our material belongings and creative labor are enmeshed with narratives of national belonging. Texts generated in the post-WWII moment bear an irreducible relationship to the upsurge of the black freedom struggle in the 1950s and 60s. That these texts appear belatedly rehearses the unresolved American crises, both psychic and material, regarding historically-contingent identity formation and the elusive nature of civil rights. These texts' resurrections in our current "post-racial" moment—whose very temporal insistence on the "post" reveals an antithesis—exhibit the imbricated, irreducible timeframes of their mobile receptions and always deferred meanings.

In this way, the posthumous text performs a haunting: an excess that refuses plotting, in every sense. The uncertain status of such texts—cut loose from their author's control, and vulnerable to repurposing and editing—offers us new ways for thinking



about how and why we read and teach given texts, and what it is that we “know” when we proclaim to “know” the facts of an author’s life and use them as a tool for reading the text. Invoking the adjective “posthumous” does something to the way we read and think about a literary text. Paradoxically, posthumous publications both celebrate and efface the late author, by invoking, but also distancing us from, the late author’s name and ownership over the text.

Pressing subversively against demands for artistic maturation and teleological resolution, these posthumously published texts rely upon a collaborative sociality for their existence. They render visible the fundamental instability of authorial intention, as they are signed by an other—the editor or executor—then made available to readers, who likewise call the posthumous text into ecstatic being. Ecstatic reading resists strict correspondences between an author’s life and work, and champions the posthumous text’s mobile relevance for engaging the complexities of postwar American life. My project’s concerns with social identity, authorship, national belonging, and human temporality have informed my ecstatic practice of reading in and against the contexts of the emergence of these texts, with the aim of exploring, from an under-considered angle, the still resonant and relevant force of civil-rights-era literature, both in the there and then and the here and now. This project has endeavored to pose more questions than it has answered—that is, to encourage, rather than delimit, the posthumous text’s ambiguity and generative excess.

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