The Rhetoric of Future Harm:

Representations and Figurations of the Child in Contemporary American Discourses of Catastrophe

by

Rebekah Sheldon

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Robert Reid-Pharr

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Mario DiGangi

Date

Executive Officer

Jamie Skye Bianco

Carrie Hintz

Steven Kruger

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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My objective in this project is to draw attention to the frequency with which the figure of the child appears in representations of catastrophe and to map out the causes and consequences of that association. *The Rhetoric of Future Harm* is thus a rhetorical and tropological study of the child as a figure in contemporary discourse. In what follows, I will propose that the child-figure condenses fears about the human future. A longstanding figure in American culture, the child in contemporary representations of catastrophe, I contend, captures and contains the energies of change, transforming them into anxious fantasies of harm. In particular, I look at representations and rhetorics that bring the child's economy of meanings to bear on the threatened human future. I argue that the deep and pervasive anxiety about the future of the human discloses the apprehension of complexity. I find in this apprehension the nascent recognition of further futures and new forms for a (post)-humanity and a post-humanism. The child-figure is thus a deeply ambivalent attempt to harness, capture and control, the movements of the future and the meanings of life-itself.

The Rhetoric of Future Harm investigates four intensively invested sites where life-itself takes the face of the child: the rhetoric of urgency employed by popular environmentalism; the individuation of life characteristic of rescue narratives and reproductive futurism; the sacralization of the human world in post-apocalypses and the cultivation of regimes of meaning in literary theory. The middle two chapters, "Rescue and Reproductive Futurism" and "Redemptive Catastrophes and Metaphysical Materialisms" conduct close studies of single novels, Joanna Russ's feminist SF novel *We Who Are About To*… (1973) in the second chapter and Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic *The Road* (2006) in the third. Taken together these chapters represent a sustained investigation of the metaphysics of the child under conditions of ecological threat. The first and last chapters, "Eco-Catastrophe and the Queer Matter of the Future" and "Life Matters Beyond the Child," look at the distributions of the rhetoric of the child in non-fictional discursive domains.

Acknowledgments

Opening to the front page of Lee Edelman's *No Future*, I stumbled on a torn sheet of loose-leaf notebook paper. Its message – "Start with Hayles on disembodiment & scratch the intro to Darwin" – is in its form as familiar to writers as it was momentarily unfamiliar to me as it fell out of my book. That I ever got from that note to this dissertation is due to the generosity and wisdom of many friends, advisors, students and colleagues. My thanks first of all to my dissertation advisor, Robert Reid-Pharr, and to my readers, Jamie Skye Bianco, Carrie Hintz and Steven Kruger, for their enthusiasm, patience and sound advice. I am immensely grateful to them all. Truly, this work would not be what it is without them. In addition, I would like to thank Duncan Faherty and my colleagues and students at Queens College who made my graduate teaching experience a joy. I give special recognition to my students in the seminar on feminist science studies, whose dedication to and excitement at thorny questions of representation and reality helped me to think through many of the issues that inform my dissertation. I thank Batya Weinbaum at *FemSpec* and Lisa Yaszek, Karen Hellekson and the other editors of *Practicing Science Fiction* for editorial support and revision suggestions during a crucial period in the writing of this dissertation. I am grateful to Eugene Thacker, then of Rutgers University, for his early mentorship and for recognizing merit enough in my undergraduate work to publish its results. I thank the Ph.D. Program in English at the Graduate Center for ongoing support and for awarding me the Lynn Kadison dissertation-year fellowship for excellent scholarship and distinguished service. Without the support and influence of these people and institutions, I would not have been able to achieve what I have achieved in my time at the Graduate Center.

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Introduction

> Secular salvation history depends on the power of images and the temporality of ultimate threats and promises to contain the heteroglossia and flux of events. This is the sense of time and of representation that I think informs technoscience in the United States.
>
> Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium,*10

The 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15) held in Copenhagen, Denmark, began with a cultural welcoming ceremony whose centerpiece was the premier showing of *Please Help the World,* a four-minute video shot for the occasion by Danish director Mikkel Blaabjerg Poulsen. In four movements, the video narrates a six-year-old girl's decision to shoot a video of her own for the Raise Your Voice campaign, a joint venture of the Danish government and YouTube created to foster and host user-generated climate change awareness videos. The girl is first shown watching raindrops collect in a puddle on a grass playground. The location then cuts to her home where we find her watching television coverage of climate disasters, though it remains unclear whether these constitute many small tragedies or one worldwide catastrophe. Indeed, in the next movement the girl dreams that she has awoken to find herself alone in the middle of an eco-apocalypse: stranded in a desert whose parched plains are soon darkened by storm clouds and then inundated with floods. She wakes herself up by screaming and the sound elicits the help of her father, who shows her live video feed from the COP15. Inspired by what she has seen, the girl grabs a video camera and races to the roof.

The sequence then breaks off as the point of view switches from a third-person image of the girl holding the camera to the camera recording the girl. In this new frame, the girl, speaking directly to the audience, says clearly in English: “Please help the world.” Her image detaches from the frame and in falling away from the camera starts a cascade of tiny screens, each disclosing a child who yells “Please help save the world!” as the violins soar. Finally the thousands of tiny videos of screaming children fall together to form the COP15 logo – a meshwork globe whose soft blue glow is as suggestive of images of ovum in utero as it is of pictures of the Earth from space. After flashing the conference information, the image stabilizes around the words “We have the power to save the world.” A second later, the single word “Now” joins the sentence.

Haraway describes the co-constitution of the visual rhetoric of complexity (the meshwork), biotechnical life (the ovum) and the allegedly pre-discursive (the planet, the child):

> The fetus and the planet Earth are sibling seed worlds in technoscience. If NASA photographs of the blue, cloud-swathed whole Earth are icons for the emergence of global, national, and local struggles over a recent natural-technical object of knowledge called the environment, then the ubiquitous image of glowing, free-floating human fetuses condone and intensify struggles over an equally new and disruptive techno-scientific object of knowledge, namely “life-itself”…. The fetus and the whole Earth concentrate the elixir of life as a complex system. (174)

Haraway importantly recalls that the fetus and the globe result from techno-scientific scopic regimes only recently perfected whose erasure from the scene of encounter comes

from the way the sensuous colors and forms seem to "signify the immediately natural and embodied" (174). Together, the child and the globe give face and figure to the abstraction "life-itself." As *Please Help the World* demonstrates, the immediate and sensuous apprehension of complexity enabled by the fetus and the globe circulate alongside and lend their new significations to the child and the pastoral in an expanding, mutually inflecting and reversible metonymic chain: child-fetus-ovum-womb; planet-ecology-land-place.

The children's appeal was directed to the audience attending the two-week long conference, predominately composed of diplomats and other government officials from those countries who had been party to the preceding treaties and negotiations starting with the United Nation's Framework Convention on Climate Change, drafted 15 years ago (thus the 15 in Conference Of the Parties [COP15]), commonly called the Earth Summit. Haraway locates the Earth Summit as one result of the techno-scientific, governmental and managerial processes that came together to produce the idea of a threatened ecology, which found its

> constitutive birth pangs in resource management practices in such institutions as national fisheries in the 1920s and 1930s; in the post-World War II theoretical fascination with all things cybernetic; in the Atomic Energy Commission-mediated research projects in the 1950s for tracing radioisotopes through food chains in the Pacific ocean; in 1970s global modeling practices indebted to the Club of Rome and to international projects such as the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere program; and in the

> early salvos of widespread ‘green war’ as a dominant New World Order security concern, with its diplomatic forms played out in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. (*Modest_Witness* 13)

The COP15, an effect of these programs and institutions and the most contemporary iteration of the 1992 Earth Summit, has its roots and objectives in worldwide security, management of resources and populations, mitigation strategies and diplomatic negotiations. As a technical object, the environment already implies complex, catastrophic mobility. The opening iconography of the child, and particularly of the plaintive child, recodes catastrophe from the basis of the world-as-system to the specter of harm haunting the future.

In a press release, Poulsen reportedly described *Please Help the World* as a “film that speaks to the heart rather than to the brain.” As in the film itself, his statement leaves the correlations inexplicit. That the film can rely on an implicit sentimental grammar for its impact testifies to the regularity of this discursive formation. In fact, user contributed videos on Raise Your Voice consistently feature children. A typical submission, *Le Temps est Venu* (The Time is Now), uses face-morphing technology to create seamless transitions between the faces of children representing diverse nations. Each face is accompanied by the equivalent of the English word “Please.”

Le Temps est Venu shares with *Please Help the World* several narrative and structural elements that make the implicit argument legible. Both videos begin with the child and end with the planet or a planet-like substitute. In *Le Temps*, the child’s face merges with the iconic NASA shot of the Earth from space. Revealed as two iterations of the same face, the metonymic child-Earth dyad stares back at us as a single entity. This

singularity is crucial. Both videos make some gesture toward the notion of humanity as a local-global population, but both do so by multiplying the single child. Each child, in his or her unique individuality, as if alone, stands in the same metonymic relationship with the planet. Though infinitely substitutable one for the other, none is of lesser value. On the contrary, *Le Temps est Venu* lovingly lingers on each detail of each beautiful child's face before it morphs into the next.

A swarm of children might call to mind humanity's animality, its species-being.[1] Despite the gesture toward global inclusion, however, these videos do not focus on populations of children but instead emphasize the individual life contained in the single child. They repeat that singularity across many frames and, in the case of the official film, in the conference logo. The planet, too, crests alone. As metonymic icons, the child and the planet singularize life-itself. They enclose the complex movements and swarming multiplicities of biological and ecological systems within the unitary and unified visages of the blue-green Earth and the child's face. The famous NASA photo that captures the face of the globe surrounded by darkness, which came to be the slogan of the Whole Earth movement, singularized for the first time what had before been unencompassable within one frame: the Earth as system. At the same time, it produced a deceptively still image. In the same way, ultrasound images disembody and singularize the fetus, opening access to the fetus as process at the same time and by the same movement that captured it at a single point.

Extending Haraway's incisive description of the globe and the child within the contemporary bio-technical politics of life-itself, I contend that enclosing complexity

[1] The term "species-being" comes from Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 243.

within these performative images privileges the stillness, unity and isolation that makes life-itself appear vulnerable, unique and in need of protection. Thus the child and the planet envisage a politics whose recognition of complexity is folded into the rhetoric of protection. Locked in tropic correspondence, the planet inflects and deepens the child's association with nature, the child lends its humanity to the planet, and the vulnerable innocence historically associated with the child enshrouds the Earth. Beyond the technical elicitation that renders them visible, the image of the planet in space and the child in the womb circulate as discursive technologies that labor to collapse life-itself, defined as the potentially catastrophic mobility of systemic complexity, back into life, defined as static or progressively developing forms-of-life. As the speaker for future generations, the child encompasses a temporal narrative that grafts present-moment urgency (*Le Temps Est Venu!)* onto distant futurities.

Thus the child's and the planet's co-emergence has less to do with the simultaneous deployment in the late `60s of satellite and ultrasound technologies, than with the apprehension of biological, ecological and chemical affectivities exacerbated in part by those very technologies. In one sense, this could not be more obvious: Both videos present themselves as persuasive, "heart"-centered pleas for help, a plea made by the child to the adult viewers and on behalf of the planet to implement policies in the service of reversing trends, arresting movement and creating stasis and to do so "Now." The unstated but necessary third term in the convergence of the pleading child and the ecologically precarious world shows up in the video in the displaced form of the child's dream, but also in the child herself: She advocates for the planet because, as the figure of life, she stands in metonymic figuration of the children of the future in whose name we

should pursue environmental action. As performative figurations, the child and the planet sentimentalize stasis in the service of life. This dissertation, *The Rhetoric of Future Harm: Representations and Figurations of the Child in Contemporary American Discourses of Catastrope*, explores the consequences of that figural arrangement as a sentimental economy, a temporal rhetoric and a causal logic evocable in a plurality of contexts through the same highly wrought iconic figure.

II

My objective in this project is to draw attention to the frequency with which the figure of the child appears in representations of catastrophe and to map out the causes and consequences of that association. *Future Harm* is thus a rhetorical and tropological study of the child as a figure in contemporary discourse. In what follows, I will propose that the child-figure condenses fears about the human future. A longstanding figure in American culture, the child in contemporary representations of catastrophe, I contend, captures and contains the energies of change, transforming them into anxious fantasies of harm. In particular, I look at representations and rhetorics that bring the child's economy of meanings to bear on the threatened human future. I argue that the deep and pervasive anxiety about the future of the human discloses the apprehension of complexity. I find in this apprehension the nascent recognition of further futures and new forms for a (post)-humanity and a post-humanism.

In this context, the child's connection to generation and lineage takes on new significance. The modern, post-Romantic depiction of the child as natural, innocent and pure, when indexed to the human as a species, denotes instead genetic and biological purity. The sacrality of the child pivots on his obligation to maintain the self-similarity of

the human and to reproduce the human into the future. The child-figure thus supplements the threat to the human future by standing in its place and figuring its stakes. The same qualities that make it such an apt metonymy for the human, however – its connection to proper generational transmission and the promise of future generations – also highlights its status as not quite fully human, still bearing the vestiges of the same dynamic biological processes as are in contention in eco- and bio-catastrophes. The child-figure is thus a deeply ambivalent attempt to harness, capture and control the movements of the future and the meanings of life-itself.

Future Harm investigates four intensively invested sites where life-itself takes the face of the child: the rhetoric of urgency employed by popular environmentalism; the individuation of life characteristic of rescue narratives and reproductive futurism; the sacralization of the human world in post-apocalypses and the cultivation of regimes of meaning in literary theory. The middle two chapters, "Rescue and Reproductive Futurism" and "Redemptive Catastrophes and Metaphysical Materialisms" conduct close studies of single novels, Joanna Russ's feminist science fiction novel *We Who Are About To…* (1973) in the second chapter and Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) in the third. Taken together these chapters represent a sustained investigation of the metaphysics of the child under conditions of ecological threat. The second chapter looks to Russ's critique of the sacralization of life in the temporality of rescue, and especially in the idea, shared by social movements of disparate political stripes, that rescuing the future may be effected by rescuing the child, in order to find an alternative to what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (*No Future* 28). The third chapter finds in McCarthy's novel a peculiar formal doubling that I read as mapping onto

the form-matter and transcendence-immanence split. Ostensibly unified by the apocalypse, their continued division results not from the failure of the apocalypse but from the anguish of its success. What McCarthy's novel despairs of – the inhuman fullness of the alien Earth released from its service as a human world – must be rectified by disjoining the contingent present from the promised redemption of the future. The bridge between them comes in the form of the sacred child.

The first and last chapters, "Eco-Catastrophe and the Queer Matter of the Future" and "Life Matters Beyond the Child," look at the distributions of the rhetoric of the child in non-fictional discursive domains. The first chapter reads speculative non-fictional accounts of the imminently real future, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* together with speculative film and fiction to demonstrate how popular environmentalism develops a newly secularized apocalyptic temporality, which takes the face of the child as its icon. The final chapter charts the production of the child's face in literary theories of the signifier, of *jouissance,* and of affect, to discover the energetic relays that make the child such a persuasive and efficient conductor for the energies of change.

III

This work emerged from my disquiet with the ubiquitous assertion in contemporary American culture that the child *is* the future and thus that protecting the child *is* protecting the future. These equivalences likewise pivot in the reverse direction: the future is (in) the child and thus the desire to protect the future may be met by protecting the child and, by extension, the fetus and the woman who carries it. That this concern for the child gets differentially applied according to the child's class, race, ethnicity, nationality, incarceration status, gender, sexuality, cuteness, politeness and

degree of normalcy and that of his parents and guardian is self-evidently the case and this work will not labor to prove so. My focus is on the child as a figure of rhetoric in discourses of catastrophe. As I sought out this child, I came increasingly to recognize the indistinction between the face of the child and life-itself.

I began this work four years ago in what in hindsight appears as the middle point between the "War on Terror" and the current recession, though such historicizing gestures smack of the closed historiography Walter Benjamin compares to the ring of the rosary.[2] I locate myself here to tell the story of how I came to pursue a different child than the one who has gained the most critical legibility: the sexually vulnerable child. Indeed, I came to the project with the observation that what Jasbir Puar calls "the sexuality of terrorism" (*Terrorist* vii) appeared most obviously to me in the displaced form of the heightened persecution of, and expanded definitions for, sex offenses, and particularly in the increased vigilance around pedophilia. While the anxiety over pedophilia often gets attributed in the popular press to teenagers' pervasive use of social networking sites and the concomitant breach of traditional boundaries around the private home, the 2006 creation in the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of the Sex Offenders' Registry demonstrates that the corrective differs from the problem only in the subject of its attention. The enforced publicity of the sex offender, the broadening of that designation to include victimless and unmotivated crimes, and the legalization in many states of civil confinement doubled in displacement the hyper-visibility of the stateless terrorist confined to the prison-camp. As internal enemy, stateside stateless so to speak, the pedophile embodied what Giorgio Agamben made famous through the image of the

[2] Benjamin, 263.

concentration camp: bare life. “Bare life,” writes Agamben, “remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (*Homo Sacer* 11). Bare life, embodied in the homo sacer, the enemy who can neither be put to death nor released, stands in the place, for Agamben, of humanity’s *zoë*, the livingness of the human-animal from against which humanity’s exceptionality stands forth. Thus, the homo sacer must subtend political sovereignty as an “inclusive exclusion” (8).

Through this engagement with Agamben, the child and the pedophile came to appear to me as a kind of epiphenomenon, no less important for that, no less *lived* for that, but disclosing something that need not take that form at all. That thinking dovetailed with my sense that the figure of the pedophile was itself a distorting metonymy for the far broader terrain of children and sex, a field that includes teen pregnancy and motherhood, race and population control, censorship and pornography, sex education and access to contraception, abortion rights and questions of consent, fashion and media consumption habits – even industrial milk production and vaccination – and the host of child-types that accompany them: from the bad girl of anti-teen pregnancy campaigns to the confused child stumbling unknowingly onto a pornographic website, a figure frequently conjured by Internet filter software providers. What skeins together these polyvalent figures is the reoccurrence of sex and reproduction, on the one hand, and the sense of the child as peculiarly vulnerable to harm, on the other.

The multiplex field of childhood studies addresses the figure of the child from one of two broad perspectives: either by investigating the discursive construction of the child and childhood from historical or sociological evidence, a tack which privileges the

ideological utility of norms of childhood,[3] or by investigating the logic that the child-figure makes available, which begins with the Freudian provenance of the post-Romantic child-figure. Carolyn Steadman's work may be taken as exemplary of the latter perspective. In *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780 – 1930*, Steadman shows how new ideas about human interiority circulated through the child in Victorian England and Europe, particularly through the powerful articulation of Freudian psychoanalysis, whose use of the child as the subject of analysis and as analytic rubric doubly filiated the modern child to the adult self: "Not only did 'history' help to create the idea of interiority," Steadman writes, "but the individual and personal history that a child embodied came to be used to represent human 'insideness'" (4).

Like *Strange Dislocations*, James R. Kincaid's *Child-Loving* reads the child as a vehicle. However, Kincaid differs from Steadman, and from historical readings of the child, in asserting an emotional rather than epistemological function for the child. Desire, he argues, finds convenient lodging in the child-figure, and though it does redound on the child, it has little to do with any particular child or group of children. Kincaid's book focuses on the consumption by adults of images and figures of childhood innocence as vacuity. He sees the negativity of descriptions of childhood as creating a "wonderfully hollow category, able to be filled up with anyone's overflowing emotions" (12). The child elicits strong emotion, in Kincaid's logic, because eliciting strong emotion is what the child-figure is supposed to do.

[3] A perspective that includes work on children's literature. For examples of the historical and sociological school, see Ariés; Mintz; Zelizer. For examples from literary studies, see Rose; Sánchez-Eppler.

In summary, then, childhood studies looks at "stories we tell to children, stories we tell about children, stories we tell about ourselves as children" (Bruhm and Hurley ix). The double-bind that insists that the child has no story, i.e., that the child as artifact of nature has not yet acceded to the performative requirements of adulthood that might entail storytelling as self-constitution, while endlessly telling stories about the child, makes the child a fecund site for queer theoretical readings. In *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley attempt to do justice to both sides of that bind by devoting half of their reader to essays about the figural logic of the child and the discursive construction of the child and the other half to essays about the experience of actual or imagined children. Like Kincaid, Bruhm and Hurley have an ethical commitment to actually existing children, which they parse in their co-written introduction as a desire to "conceive of children as desiring creatures who, although tough to access in theory, exist and make stories beyond the simple ones adults see in them" (xxxiv). Somewhere in the crosshairs of this double-bind, in other words, are children who must tussle with the narrativized expectations and social norms that adult figurations hand down to them while their figural doubles are put to work circulating meanings and eliciting feelings. In this interpretive meshwork, the figure of the pedophile becomes legible as a technology of capture via amplification. By reconsolidating the many child-figures under the single sign of vulnerability and casting all the social ills to which the child is construed as vulnerable onto the one unspeakable social ill of perversion, the figure of the pedophile, like the figure of the terrorist, amplifies a single story and reifies its standing as a story.

These texts have greatly influenced this work. Yet lost in the discussion is the connection of the child-figure not only to sexuality, desire and the circulation of feeling, but also to generation, reproduction and life. I know of no work that theorizes the child's link to sexuality in popular discourse in terms of reproduction.[4] And yet the child is tied to reproduction beyond the question of sexual innocence: in the close affiliation of the child with proper family and gender roles, that is, with hetero-normativity; in his continued association with the womb, the fetus and technologies of procreation; in her form, which assures the self-similarity of the human as a species; and in her promise to continue that form into the future through proper procreation.

Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* has been a constant companion in the search for ways to think the overlay of bare life and the life-itself contained in the child. *No Future* breaks with the orientation of childhood studies in its relentless disinterest in the child, real or constructed. Edelman's focus is on the structure of politics, of the psyche, of the social order and of the real whose gaps the child-figure labors to, but fails to, seal over. The attempt he calls "reproductive futurism" (28), the failure, likewise:

> Politics is a name for the temporalization of desire, for its translation into a narrative, for its teleological determination. Politics, that is, by externalizing and configuring the fictive form of a narrative, allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely *as* desire, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by

[4] The same is not true for fetal representation. See Weingarten (*Genealogies*) for a comprehensive and theoretically nonpareil reading of abortion narratives and theories of life and choice.

> what disarticulates the narrative of desire: the drives, themselves intractable, unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning-production. (italics his 9)

For Edelman, the child promises that tomorrow will be another day. But that is precisely the problem. What reproductive futurism projects is an end to the story. The apocalyptic desire for total meaning that subtends reproductive futurism fails, for Edelman, because it seeks to encapsulate that which can never succumb to reduction as singular or self-same. As he writes in the long passage above, narrative progression is fueled by the same desire that will not allow the narrative to conclude because, as a drive, desire does not terminate in meaning. The shape of Edelman's point, the sense it conveys of endless deferrals in the name of desire, meets my sense of the child-figure. But the topos of my investigation is not, as Edelman's is, the psychic life of power, but the power-relations that adhere in conditions of biopolitics and in the technical elicitation of life-itself.

Rather than a prop for the Symbolic relations of the Law (29), the child in its connection to reproduction seems to me to replace the apprehension of future difference with the replication of the present into the future. And yet, in so doing, it keeps the apprehension of future difference in circulation in the form of catastrophe. The double, Gilles Deleuze writes, "is never a projection of the interior; on the contrary it is an interiorization of the outside" (*Foucault* 81). Symmetrical with the child-figure, the catastrophic is made palpable by the vision machines of modernity and spurned as the future harm whose arrest the child pleads with us to effect in the present. Yet alongside naming the "temporal modality that organizes interpretive practice" (*Modest_Witness* 11)

as what Haraway calls “figural realism,” catastrophe also names the cascading, ramifying, bifurcating, turbulent movements of complex systems:

> Intersecting with – and sometimes displacing – the development, fulfillment, and containment proper to figural realism, the temporal modality pertaining to cyborgs is condensation, fusion, and implosion. This is more the temporality of the science-fictional wormhole, that spatial anomaly that casts travelers into unexpected regions of space, than of the birth passages of the biopolitical body. (*Modest_Witness* 12)

If for Edelman, the future is the product of the figural realism of “secular salvation narratives” (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 10), then the future encountered through the wormhole of catastrophe might also find apt description in an account of writing:

> Let us begin again. Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be ‘present,’ appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. (Derrida, “Différance’ 394)

The future is first and foremost the apprehension of “self-modification” (Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy* 68). Such apprehension has to do with ontogenic and phylogenic becoming, the irreversible arrow of evolution. The child as figure for life seems, on the one hand, capable of rounding that arrow off to a spiral of inheritance, a branching tree of descent, but, on the other, the child introduces the possibility of divergence from which there can be no return. Our historical moment of “technobiopower” (*Modest_Witness* 12) may

make complexity in interconnectivity the source of technical control, but the indetermination of any one actor over a complex system subtends all complexity as an ontological predicate.

As Haraway rightly points out, science fiction has a compelling relationship with the complex future. In the coda to this dissertation, I offer a definition of science fiction as a modeling system. Science fiction is the preeminent vehicle for working through the fantasy of a harmed future. In serving that end, science fiction also addresses fundamental questions about the nature of change. By studying the child in science fiction, *Future Harm* explores a series of broader themes that are central to many fields of study: time and temporality, nature and technology, the animal and the human, reproduction and survival, and apocalypse and catastrophe. When I began this work, I started with two simple questions: Why do things change? How can we apprehend change's permutations? Science fiction shares with post-structural philosophy, queer theory and science studies a commitment to addressing the mutability of the world as a key philosophical and political problem.

Science fiction likewise shares with the child-figure the loose assemblage of content and mode of expression. That the former might diverge from the latter to engender works whose science-fictionality comes from its extrapolative style rather than its content or child-figures whose only wisp of the child resides in the shape of its formal logic -- these imaginary texts are this work's vanishing point.

Chapter I

Eco-Catastrophe and the Queer Matter of the Future

> Matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things. Mattering is differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences. Changing patterns of difference are neither pure cause nor pure effect; indeed, they are that which effects, or rather enacts, a causal structure, differentiating cause and effect.
>
> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 137

> An absolute missile does not abolish chance.
>
> Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 29

I

Over the past quarter century, popular environmentalism has quite successfully rejoined the conceptually severed relations between human and natural productions and fostered awareness of the harm current practices visit on the future.[1] Environmentalism is not alone in this interest in radical social transformation. As Pheng Cheah has shown, however, antihumanist and social constructionist accounts, by justly reacting to the

[1] I use the term "popular environmentalism" to distinguish commercial, policy and activist discourses from literary and academic fields like ecocriticism.

oppressive and misguided standards of "natural" behavior, have continued to cut nature from culture and passivity from activity.[2] By relegating nature to the given and the immutable, such accounts overlook the active dynamism that transversally connects all matter.

Environmentalism and ecocriticism, in tandem with philosophies of ontology and science studies,[3] have served as useful rejoinders to these schools of criticism and the philosophical tradition of Western humanism they inadvertently recapitulate.[4] The success of the environmental movement finds its fullest expression in new legal policies and regulatory practices, such as emissions caps, endangered species designations and green consumer items: all practices aimed at reducing the severity of the coming catastrophe. As the varieties of environmentalism have been codified as juridico-legal and regulatory practices, however, the discursive privilege accorded to catastrophe has

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[2] Through a review of Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* and Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Cheah describes how the insistent anti-naturalism of social constructionist thought has conceded too much ground to anthropocentric, homophobic and misogynistic uses of nature even when, as in these writers, the project is explicitly to regard the non-linguistic world as an active participant in world-making. In this, he echoes Donna Haraway's call, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, to "engage in the social process of making science" (107). Ecocriticism, by contrast, has just begun to recognize the challenge from "relativist postmodernists." See, for instance, Curry.

[3] These are broad, heterogeneous and sometimes-overlapping categories whose invocation here deserves fuller specification. Under the heading of science studies, I place critical investigations of the practice and rhetoric of science. See Haraway, *Simians* 184-188, for a good overview. "Philosophies of ontology" is, to the best of my knowledge, my own coinage. I use it to encompass philosophical works whose primary topic is the constitution of ontology. Haraway is typical of science studies in the sense that her work proceeds from criticism to the construction of an onto-epistemology, while Elizabeth Grosz is typical of philosophies of ontology in the sense that her work on other philosophers (e.g. Henri Bergson, Charles Darwin) gives rise to her philosophical system and approach to scientific epistemology. In general, then, the difference is of degree rather than kind.

[4] For an elaboration on the connection between social construction and Western humanism that includes good working definitions of both terms, see Barad 134-136.

been amplified. Often, the argument is posed in terms of catastrophic loss of a suitable ecology for humanity as a species, which enables the U.S. universalist legal structure to acknowledge a particular recipient of protection.[5] In this sense, environmentalist activism engages in the same tactics as identity-based rights-claims. Despite the effectiveness of this strategy,[6] the positing of an end-point to ecological change pulls against the central insight that matter is mobile. Further, by linking environmental policy to catastrophe, popular environmentalism dovetails with a pervasive belief in the need for security against a harmed and harming future in the name of future generations.

The future is not a self-evident category of analysis. It relies for its sense on a series of assumptions: First and foremost that the effects of present actions have already begun to shape the future; second, that we may therefore extrapolate the future from those actions, that we might, in other words, see the coming future; and, third, that though those actions produce changes, most things – from the laws of physics to the legitimacy of nation-states – will remain unchanged enough to provide a stable background against which to chart the changes whose ramifications we can then call the future. Together, these assumptions cast the movements of time as the reorganization of space. It is as a plot, grid or landscape, that the already present future may retain certain topographical features while other features remain indeterminate and thus open to the shaping effects of the present.

The indeterminacy built into popular environmentalism accounts for its tangency to theories of matter and becoming; however, popular environmentalism takes

[5] See my discussion of Brown, below, for a fuller explanation of universalism.
[6] I am thinking here of Spivak's "strategic essentialism." See Spivak 207-210. Thanks to Jamie Skye Bianco for the reference.

indeterminacy as the source of threat and thus labors to police its boundaries. Keith Ansell-Pearson, in his book-length treatment of Henri Bergson's philosophy of time, contrasts the topographical conception of duration, which he calls a discrete multiplicity to emphasize its fixed boundaries, with a systemic conception of duration, which he calls a virtual multiplicity, to emphasize systemic indeterminacy:

> The distinction between a discrete or actual multiplicity and a continuous or virtual one marks a difference between thinking objects and things discretely, whereby the relations between them are ones of juxtaposition and exteriority and thinking the components of a system in terms of fusion and interpenetration. (*Philosophy* 72)

Elizabeth Grosz, in her work on Bergson, refers to Ansell-Pearson's "discrete or actual multiplicities" (*Philosophy* 72) as "mechanism" (*Nick* 210), a term that has the advantage of evoking a system subjected to and extrapolated from laws that govern each aspect of its functioning as if they were separable from the whole. By contrast, a virtual multiplicity "changes in kind in the very process of getting divided up" (Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy* 72). Dividing present and future, nature and culture is such a division functioning at the level of discursive-material feedback. Or, in other words, "changing patterns of difference are neither pure cause nor pure effect; indeed, they are that which effects, or rather enacts, a causal structure, differentiating cause and effect" (Barad, *Meeting* 137). By asserting an already territorialized[7] future, popular environmentalism discounts the very capacity for change that its rhetoric propounds. By overestimating the strength of discrete multiplicities (e.g., subsystems like species populations) while

[7] Alongside deterritorialization and reterritorialization, a key term in the thinking of Deleuze and Felix Guattari. See *Thousand* 508-510.

underestimating the mutability of virtual multiplicities (e.g., ramifying ecologies), popular environmentalism reifies the causal structure it promotes, locates itself outside of those causalities, and hypostatizes the environment as the passive victim of the very dynamism whose recognition it demands.

The landscapification of the future organizes the present around the need for security. The future, however, cannot be truly opposed; it may only be guided such that it might reproduce the fragile safety housed by the present. It is on behalf of, but also through, the child that the present may be safely reproduced as the future, forming a closed loop via generation. The threat to the future, in this sense, emanates from the notion, inherent in the idea of the future, that tomorrow may not resemble today, i.e., that radical change is not only possible but is also continuously operating within the logic of self-similarity and as the condition of reproducibility. Let this double enunciation stand as a definition of futurity. As I will argue below, attempts to fix (that is, to heal and to immobilize) the future rely on closed, determinate systems. It is against this reproduction of fixity that I seek to situate the queerness of matter.[8]

While popular environmentalism has taken up the sustainable cultivation of nature, a nature impacted by human action, as its primary topos, philosophers of ontology have turned to matter, both organic and inorganic, to dismantle the boundaries of nature/culture.[9] In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use the term

[8] In a fascinating, if too brief, discussion of "queer temporality" in the roundtable of the same name, Lee Edelman contrasts the becoming-historical of time that the rubric "turn toward time" effects with an atelic queer temporality. The phrase "queerness of matter" makes a symmetrical claim for matter, on which see again Cheah. See "Theorizing."

[9] In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler positions matter as the phantasmatic end-result of the process of materialization: "What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as *a process of*

"matter" as an analog to "the plane of consistency or the Body without Organs, in other words, the unformed, unorganized, nonstratified, or destratified body with all its flows: subatomic and submolecular particles, pure intensities, prevital and prephysical free singularities" (43). In the passage that heads this chapter, Barad defines matter as itself the agent whose force acts as the cross-cutting flows across the plane of consistency. Barad's definition usefully keeps us in mind of the fact that matter in its classical denotation stands in dyadic opposition to terms like form and spirit, and that we must therefore be on guard against "making of it a new fundamental principle" (Derrida, *Specters* 65) susceptible to a simple reversal of values. As Barad describes it, matter cannot be located in the form or the movement, the contingent conditions of living or the animating principle. Matter can only be apprehended as iteration and permutation, or the immanence of oppositions. Thus although both radical materialists and popular environmentalists advocate for the apprehension of nature's activity, the idea of matter importantly differs from that of nature because it does not economize individuals or evaluate more or less desirable states against a transcendent index.[10] Gilles Deleuze writes, for instance, "an animal, a thing, is never separable from its relations with the world. The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior"

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materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (9). Her focus on the production of the (sexed human) body is of a piece with her interest in (gendered human) subjectivity. Patricia Ticineto Clough's discussion of matter as "inherently dynamic, operating as a complex, open system under far-from-equilibrium conditions" (3) in an essay published a decade after Butler's book folds the process of materialization, which Butler associates with power in the Foucauldian sense, into matter, thus almost completely reversing Butler's meaning. This more contemporary use of matter as itself an agent of change enfolds Foucauldian power as a complementary aspect of its physics. For more on the ontology of Foucauldian power, see Deleuze, *Foucault*.

[10] Haraway calls that index the "God-tricks." She advocates an ethics based on local knowledge and "standpoint" effects. See *Simians*, 189-195.

("Ethology" 628). Interiority and exteriority gain their distinctiveness through a process of incorporation and projection; they aren't immanently separate and they won't always occupy the same relations. In their shared analytic engagement with affectivity – the capacity to affect or to be affected in a nature without boundary lines[11] – environmentalism and philosophies of ontology alike deconstruct liberal humanist anthropocentricism.[12] When environmentalism proceeds from affectivity to efficacy, however, the two fields split.[13]

For Deleuze, the creativity of matter resides in its indeterminacy: "No one knows ahead of time the affects one is capable of … you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination" ("Ethology" 627). This insistence on openness and indeterminacy is a consequence of rethinking the boundaries between individuals, indeed of rethinking individuals, in terms of immanent relations of impingement. In other words, where social constructionists actively pursue change in a resistant system, and popular environmentalism advocates change toward averting catastrophe, philosophies of ontology understand change and its speeds as the constitutive condition of the world. This does not mean there are no tendencies, limits or captures to mattering, but that these are unpredictable, non-teleological, and complex: neither acausal nor deterministic. Why call this indeterminacy

[11] This phrase comes from Brian Massumi, *User's Guide* 100.
[12] The mutual disregard between these two fields is striking and deserves fuller treatment than I can give it here. For one attempt to establish a dialogue, see Palmer.
[13] James Lovelock's controversial Gaia theory is an exception to my characterization of environmentalism in all but the commitment to efficacy. See Lovelock and also see my discussion of Hird below.

the "queerness" of matter?[14] I choose this term against linear causality structured by filiation and patrimony, against the conflation of futurity with reproduction, and toward mutations and nonorganic becomings.[15]

II

As a discipline within literary studies, ecocriticism takes nature writing as the object of its analysis. In its inception in the early 1990s, it did so with a strong focus on "a distinctly up-country-and-outback orientation … rural and wilderness representation against urban and metropolitan" (Buell, "Forum" 1091). In his contribution to the *PMLA*'s "Forum on Literature of the Environment," Lawrence Buell imagines a wider scope for ecocriticism. "These projects," he writes

> include the following, and more: (1) consideration of the possibilities of certain forms of scientific inquiry (e.g. ecology and evolutionary biology) and social scientific inquiry (e.g. geography and social ecology) as models of literary reflection; (2) textual, theoretical, and historical analysis of the platial basis of human experience; (3) study of literature as a site of environmental-ethical reflection – for example, as a critique of anthropocentric assumptions; (4) retheorization of mimesis and referentiality, especially as applied to literary representation of physical environments in literary texts; (5) study of the rhetoric (e.g. its ideological

[14] Contra Morton, my use of queer in this chapter does not impute desire or sexuality to ecology, or "encourage intimacy" with the non-human world. Indeed, my understanding of queer ecology is specifically opposed to the anthropomorphizing of ecology exemplified in Morton's suggestion that "queer ecological ethics … regard beings as people even if they aren't people" ("Queer" 279), though I find his overall point salient.
[15] On non-organic life, see De Landa, *Thousand*.

> valences of gender, race, politics) of any and all modes of environmental discourse. (Buell 1091)

While admirably broad in its methodological aims and generic choices, Buell employs a narrow definition of its primary topic, one that takes as self-evident that ecocriticism will be interested in literatures of place, ethics of environment and sciences of ecology. These three areas circulate here as near-synonyms differing only in the tools used to approach a monolithic and knowable nature, whether parsed as place, environment or ecology. Such assumptions have in recent years come under attack, most vituperatively from proponents of a queer approach to ecocriticism. In a recent column in the same journal, Timothy Morton locates the queering effect on ecocriticism of the deconstructive approach to the "metaphysical manifold that separates 'inside' from 'outside' …. fundamental for thinking the environment as a metaphysical, closed system – Nature" ("Queer" 274). Instead of nature understood as spatially locatable, Morton uses the analogy of the river to point to the difficulty of pronouncing any single thing *the* environment: "Life-forms are liquid: positing them as separate is like putting a stick in a river" (275). Although Morton does not use the word "matter," and in fact emphatically distances his version of queer ecology from "postmodern theory" (276), the resulting "*mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations" (emphasis his 275) he does advocate bears little distinction from the conception of matter outlined in the preceding section.

Unlike eco-criticism, which takes its methodological commitments with due seriousness, popular environmentalism is a form of persuasive rhetoric. As such, it advocates. That is its vocation. It is a proscriptive endeavor.[16] What it advocates is

[16] For this reason, it has more in common with self-help literature.

attention to the *imminently real* future. Rachel Carson, in her 1962 *Silent Spring*, pioneered the temporal rhetoric of imminence by joining American nature writing to techniques of scientific extrapolation. The resulting hybrid genre, a type of speculative non-fiction that easily segues into the fictional, takes the future as its primary topos.[17] For example, *Silent Spring* opens with a chapter entitled "A Fable for Tomorrow." In it, Carson uses all of the conventions of the fable form, beginning with an Edenic "once" – "there once was a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony" (1) – threatened by an "evil spell" (2) that killed "children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours" (2) as well as birds, bees and animals. Instead of ending with the eradication of the evildoer, however, Carson ends with a moral – "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it to themselves" (3) – and then a direct address to the reader: "A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know" (3). As the logic clearly conveys, we must supply for ourselves the missing cathartic ending.

Framing this possible future scenario within the conventions of the fable lends it vivacity far beyond that aroused by the statistical table. Yet the fable form also conveys distance and safety by positioning itself as fantasy. This strategy tempers the apparent present reality of the scenario, whose intuition the rhetoric works to assure, with the

[17] An interesting example of the development of this form that I will not get to discuss at greater length comes from Alan Weisman's *The World Without US*. Weisman, a journalist, uses present environmental conditions and production processes to imagine what the Earth would be like if there were suddenly no human population. Equally as interesting is Weisman's website (www.worldwithoutus.com), which uses the same conceit to project event across increasingly more distant temporal durations. Weisman's book also spawned a television show and a museum exhibit and has had several imitators.

desired effect of environmental speculative non-fiction, which is to prevent that scenario from becoming real, by giving it the conventions of fantasy. The method and the motive stand at cross-purposes and the antidote, like the problem, is one of temporality. To make a fantasied possibility appear as an actuality and to do so in order to effect change requires both a rigid and a fluid conception of the future: It must be fixed and thereby knowable *and also* responsive and therefore alterable. Carson, and many others after her, effect this feat by weighting the catastrophic pastoral against descriptions of past crises. In the suspension between past harms that analogize, foretell and contribute to the coming catastrophic future, the present is constituted as the privileged space of safety.

Thus popular speculative non-fictional environmentalism urges the rescue of the future through its management. We can see, for instance in Buell's approving citation of Ulrich Beck, the way that ecocriticism recognizes matter's mobility on the one hand, while at the same time citing that mobility as the source of threat. He writes, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*:

> Underlying the advance [of eco-consciousness] has been a growing malaise about modern industrial society's inability to *manage* its unintended environmental consequences that Ulrich Beck … calls "reflexive modernization," meaning in particular that even the privileged classes of the world inhabit a global "risk society" whose *hazards cannot be anticipated, calculated and controlled, much less escaped*. (emphasis mine; Buell 5)

In this passage, Buell incises several characteristic agential cuts, to use Barad's phrase. The environment enters here as an actor on the stage of modern civilization, solicited by

industry to behave against our own best interests, resulting in “unintended environmental consequences” (Buell 5) whose location outside of intention seems to manifest most fully in the human inability to exert control over them. As goals, anticipation, calculation and control curiously recapitulate the logic of “modern industrial society” (Buell 5) to the benefit of human civilization. The resulting temporality trends toward stasis, despite the rhetoric of futurity.

Eco-critical and environmental writing often employs the imminence of catastrophe as its absolute ethical warrant on the assumption that only the willfully blind or avaricious could remain passive in the light of its coming, and so environmental hortatory aims to persuade us of the real threat of catastrophe now. The rhetoric of catastrophe then casts as a shadow the specter of an already harmed future conveyed through the metonymy of an accusative child speaking to us from that harmed future and blaming us for its, and his, harm. Indeed, in the closing paragraphs of the “Introduction” to *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore asks us to imagine that very scenario. He begins by relating the story of his son’s nearly-fatal childhood accident as a parable to explain his subsequent involvement in the environmental movement: “During that painful period I gained an ability I hadn’t had before to feel the preciousness of our connection to our children and the solemnity of our obligation to safeguard their future and protect the Earth we are bequeathing to them” (“Introduction” n.p.). Our obligation to the Earth’s future, thus, is an extension of our obligation as parents to value the “preciousness” of children. Gore then asks us to indulge him in a thought experiment. “Time has stopped,” he writes. In its suspension, we may speak to our children “as they are living their lives in the year 2023.” Gore provides their end of the conversation: “Imagine now that they are

asking us: 'What were you thinking? Didn't you care about our future? Were you really so self-absorbed that you couldn't – or wouldn't- stop the destruction of Earth's environment?'" ("Introduction").[18] The opening photo in Gore's book of himself and his heavily-pregnant wife Tipper seated in a canoe on the Caney Fork River circa 1973 encapsulates the equations between nature, heteronormative family structure, reproductive futurism and the landscapification of the future whose consequences are the subject of this work.

Nor is Gore any more susceptible because of his work as a politician to the enchantments of the child-figure than are scientists or eco-critics.[19] James Hansen begins the final chapter of *Storms of My Grandchildren,* which also bears that title, with a picture of his eleven-month old grandson Jake, that stands in metonymic relation to the "concept of responsibility to future generations" (238) Hansen encourages us to adopt. Placed without comment next to a further suggestion that lowered fertility rates will help secure a "bright future" (239), we are left to conclude that life too, even the life of future generations, had best be managed so that each individual life may be preserved and celebrated. Though the immoderate production of population threatens our future, the child's redemptive association with the natural dissevers him from the question of

[18] In *The Future of Life*, E.O. Wilson takes the opposite tack and preemptively addresses the future: "We bequeath to you the synthetic jungles of Hawaii and a scrubland where once thrived the prodigious Amazon forest …. Accept our apologies and this audiovisual library that illustrates the wondrous world that used to be" (78).

[19] Or because of his political party. Newt Gingrich, a prominent Republican during Gore's Vice-Presidency, dedicates *A Contract with the Earth*, the climate change book he co-wrote with Terry L. Maple, "to our wives, Callista and Addie, our daughters, Jackie, Kathy, Molly, Emily, and Sally, and our grandchildren, who will surely enjoy a lifetime of peace and prosperity on a cleaner, greener, and thoroughly renewed Earth" (*Contract*).

population. As Scott Russell Sanders writes in the conclusion to his *A Conservationist Manifesto*:

> The integrity we perceive in nature is our own birthright. We swim in the one and only stream of life. By recognizing that we are part of this vast, subtle, ancient order, we are restored to wholeness. A sense of communion with other organisms, with the energies and patterns of nature, is instinctive in children, and it is available to every adult who has ever watched a bird or cloud. (214)

Sanders' rhetoric makes us children of the Earth and our children as the more pure, least contaminated, version of the human as the child of nature. The child not only signifies originary wholeness, his presence marks the continued vitality of the human. In *The Coming Global Superstorm*, Art Bell, a reporter, and Whitley Strieber, a novelist, combine their two genres to form a hybrid work that intersperses factual chapters on climate change with sections from a novella about climate disaster. The novella, an action-adventure tale, ends with the discovery in the snow-buried public library on decimated New York's 5th Avenue, a group of school children shepherded by a nun:

> When Bob looked down, he saw what was without question the most amazing sight he had beheld during the storm or at any time in his life. Sitting on the wide marble floor below were about twenty children. (236)

As if their discovery betokened the continuation of life, the final scene in the novella shows the lighting of candles in the apartment towers surrounding their camp: "We're here, they [the candles] said, more of us than you thought possible, many more. We're still here" (240). This sentiment is echoed in the final factual chapter, in which Bell

writes in summary: “Mankind wants to survive. We want to prosper” (210) and we will do so by rationally limiting childbirth and developing techniques for predicting and thus managing climate disasters. The child signifies the future we (adults) threaten, the connection to nature we (adults) have corrupted and the human spirit whose ingenuity will overcome the (adult-made) disasters of the present. What has happened to ecology in this matrix? Moreover, by what moves has the imminently real catastrophic future merged with Western progressive narratives of civilizational overcoming?

This chapter attempts to spur a reevaluation of these catastrophic narratives. In urging us to rethink them, I want to emphasize the temporal effects of those narratives, rather than to deny or negate the catastrophic as such. Indeed, it seems to me that catastrophe and ecology are bound to each other, co-constitutive elements whose mutual implication threaten popular environmentalism’s reparative mandate to make the future safe for our children. Thus, my goal here is not only to show how environmentalism constructs a hetero-reproductive narrative against the catastrophic but also how catastrophe as the excluded other comes back to queer environmentalism.

This argument turns on environmentalism’s insistence that nature’s proper economy is balanced and harmonious. Such ideas already imply the interconnectedness of mobile forces, though with the provision that nature seeks stability the way water seeks its own level. Catastrophe, then, names the release of the dynamism that subtends and maintains meta-stability.[20] Like its cousin revolution, catastrophe designates a system-wide transformation, a tremor in the web of force relations that breaks up stable

[20] I draw much of this description of catastrophe from the writings of chaos theorists. They, however, tend not to use the term, preferring instead to talk about bifurcation points and strange attractors. See Prigogine and Stengers 167-170; Gleick 139-153, and Massumi, *User’s* 58-60.

nodes and sets them moving again. As such, both revolution and catastrophe are ways of talking about temporality, about the speedy or sluggish flows that are always operating on and as even the most mute and immovable objects. Unlike apocalypse, with which it is often associated, thinking the catastrophic requires the apprehension that all systems are unstable and groundless, without necessity and with no truth other than their own capacity to continue operating. By contrast, apocalypse, which also labors in the temporal register, designates that which has always already been awaiting our discovery, now at the end of the quest literally unveiled.[21] So, apocalypse requires a self-similarity beyond duration, lurking within all the ephemera of the passing hours. The balanced harmony indexed as the health of the environment, then, designates the slowness of time, the delay or deterrence of its capacity to generate turbulence and the manipulation of consequence toward that end.

In other words, ecology already implies catastrophe understood as the effects of time made visible by their escape from balance. Catastrophe is not just the necessary supplement that makes the notion of balance coherent but ecology's very self, its apocalypse. Serving as the ground rather than the opposition, catastrophe rewrites ecology as a refusal of the finality of an end and the metaphysics of health or sickness that accompanies such an ending and that is always implicitly tied to some criterion, some desirable outcome. Unacknowledged, however, catastrophe queers ecology by turning it straight. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has most forcefully described the double bind that allows systemic misrecognition to function as a virulently unstable structural

[21] See Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone." For a full discussion of apocalypse, see chapter 4.

principle, evocable in a plurality of modes and sometimes with the best of intentions.[22] By binarizing stability and movement, by laboring toward the perpetuation of one over the other, environmentalism must ignore the centrality of temporality even to a theory of stability. This willed unknowingness unfolds as self-division: on the one hand, the repetitious association of environmental goals with human children and, on the other, the specter of wayward movements that threaten the safety or even the likelihood of those children. The resulting heteronormative bias in eco-studies has catalyzed the rapidly expanding field of queer ecocriticism, but it also intimates that the criterion used to stabilize what has always been understood to be an unstable system is the continuation of the present, a continuation explicitly at odds with environmental activist argumentation and strangely akin to corporate mitigation strategies intent on subsuming green goals into capitalist production.

In what follows, I will look at three texts that will serve as heuristics for environmental temporality and the heteronormative peril that attends the division of catastrophe from ecology: J.G. Ballard's "The Garden of Time," Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* and Octavia Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night." These fictions, which are neither persuasive nor explicitly about nature, will give us new lenses through which to encounter popular environmental rhetoric. Ballard's short story allegorizes the consequences of restricting time in order to deter an already harmed future, thus sacralizing the same present that is also construed as the source of that harm. Kelly's movie generates a sense of the requisite security model surrounding and making

[22] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*.

possible deterrence. Butler's story envisions the consequences of intervening to create immobilities indexed to human values within non-human mobile systems.

III

Reversing Gore's fantasy of stopping time to speak to the future's children, but maintaining the sense of the future's presence, J.G. Ballard's "The Garden of Time" pictures the future as already harmed. As the story opens an aristocratic couple gazes out from the parapet of their castle at the rolling hills of their estate, their eyes fixed on the horizon. No sight mars the equanimity of their land, but disturbing sounds distantly echo to them: clamorous and agitated. As they watch, the tips of uncountable pitchforks breach the mount of the furthest hills. A mob of peasants is on the march. Together, they descend to the garden to pick from the glass flowers that still bloom among many stalks. The snapped bud glows and then fades; the noise increases suddenly and then dissipates. Resignedly, the couple reviews the few remaining flowers.

As the title implies, these are "time flowers" imbued with the magical property of slowing down time. While the story's organizing axis is time, its allegorical analog is space. The future is right over the horizon, as the colloquial expression has it, full-formed, immutable, and already present in the present. Rather than requiring a striding forward to meet it, this future must be held in check, prevented from engulfing the seemingly monolithic but truly fragile stasis of the present. By the tale's end, the flowers have all been picked and the distant mob has overrun the castle, revealed by their passage as the ruin it was prevented from being long past its historical moment by the powerful magic harvested in their garden. The future strips the present of its vitality, cannibalizing and entombing it, exposing it as history.

The vitality of the future is the threat the flowers protect against. Yet, change here is an illusion. It is as allegory that this story can balance on such a strict economy of symbols: the aristocrats, the mob and the flowers articulate a closed system composed of three points, or rather two points and a fulcrum. The allegory of the future as spatially located in the same frame as the present actively delimits the contours of change, reducing it to a pre-established certainty. If the tone of this tale is resignation, it is less because the barbarians are (always) at the gates and more because the threatening future has already been domesticated. The poise of the opening scene is an effect of the inevitability of the terminal scene. Rather than cusping revolution, these three elements labor together to perpetuate self-similarity. The future is already present in the present because the future is known.

I'd like to consider for a moment the determinism that renders the threatening future safe even while it retains the rhetoric of threat. As a scientific term, closed systems designate those systems that have limited interface with their environment, usually via one determining factor (heat, say, or information), which does not change the nature of the system. Ansell-Pearson explains how closed systems reduce "all change, all qualitative change, … to spatial movement" and all movement to "a mere rearrangement" (*Philosophy* 47) of already existing parts, thus the possibility of a simultaneous present and future.[23] This reductive determinism has several consequences. It allows designation of a particular threat, which can then be calculated, regularized, anticipated and managed. At the same time, however, it suspends duration, collapsing future threat into a present

[23] Ecocritical and popular environmentalist interest in space, place and landscape registers a similar desire for closure. These terms are pervasive in ecocritical writings and seem to have originated with Aldo Leopold's "land ethic." See Leopold.

configuration and cutting them away from their moorings in the multiplicity of flowing relationships that constitute the open systems of the world. Processes are then envisioned as a series of points adjacent to one another but discrete from each other, "a series of juxtaposed and successive immobilities" (*Philosophy* 50) that can be counted, placed on a grid and assessed. The determining factor in Ballard's story is the constriction of time figured as a specific technology, the time flowers. As the flowers run out, so too does the time allotted to the present. This constriction is homologous to the restriction of elements: the closed system and its two points.

In this context, then, it is not unimportant that the source of refuge in Ballard's story is contained in a beloved but failing garden. The rhetorical emphasis on rapidly approaching ecological collapse is a mainstay of hortatory environmental writing, and the constriction of time functions as the motive for management and regulation. Carson urges her readers to recognize that "there is no time" ("Silent" 168) remaining for adaptive behaviors to emerge given "the impetuous and heedless pace of man rather than the deliberate pace of nature" (169); Arne Naess' fifth point toward a deep ecology platform concerns the recognition that "present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening" ("Deep" 243); Garrett Hardin cajoles, "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush" ("Tragedy" 38); while James Lovelock urges us to see that "We are now approaching one of those tipping points, and our future is like that of the passengers on a small pleasure boat sailing quietly above the Niagara Falls, not knowing that the engines are about to fail" (*Gaia* 6). Note the spatialization of temporality in Hardin's metaphor of the "destination" and Lovelock's analogy to the Falls; the way Carson and Naess position humanity as disorderly

occupants of a space not their own: nature's pace against man's; interference in a "non-human" world. This spatialization and division reflects the closed, finite world envisioned by these ecologists. This urgency reifies the future as an already known immobility whose arrival must be delayed.

If the future is already decided it is because the elements impinging on that future are restricted to a closed set of causes. In E.O. Wilson's words, "the changes occurring now will visit harm on all generations to come" ("Environmental" 272); for Murray Bookchin, it is institutions of domination and exploitation that will "inevitable lead our planet to ecological extinction" ("Social" 60); Andrew Dobson writes that "it is within the wit of humanity to rescue itself from the abyss towards which it is plunging" ("Introduction" 9). The "wit of humanity" Dobson cites can be motivated through a dissemination of fear of the abyss: "Green politics seeks to transcend fear by feeding off it" (8). The important point here is that this "ruin," this "rapid worsening," this "harm," this "extinction," this "abyss" is already determined, the "writing is on the wall" in Winona LaDuke's phrase ("Seventh" 286). Just as the peasant army is restrained by the time-flowers of Ballard's story, it is the health of our earthly garden that can slow down and reverse our flight toward inevitable doom. While the rhetorical persuasion is aimed at transformative practice, lodging the future in a closed system limits the ends of that change to an artificially delayed present, thereby discounting the potentialities inherent in open systems.

IV

As a material-discursive practice, this catastrophic narrative produces sites of immobility. These sites, however, are located within open systems. In the following

section, I argue that open systems engender a complementary fantasy of harm. I'd like to counter-pose to Ballard's allegory of harmed futurity a tale of future harm:

An underground neo-Marxist revolutionary network, operating in an alternate U.S. that has suffered a nuclear explosion and is now at war with Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and North Korea and that has implemented a series of security measures including closed borders and privatized 24-hour full-access surveillance, schemes to upset the election of a right-wing governor by exposing his son-in-law as an adulterer. They are helped by a former adult-movie starlet turned talk-show host, a fitness maven with unsavory motives, a team of hackers, and an eccentric scientist who may or may not be connected to the politician they seek to unseat and who has recently implemented an ocean-based power station whose source of power is inscrutable to everyone but may have tipped the Earth off its axis thereby sending the aforementioned son-in-law through a rift in the space/time continuum and leaving him amnesiac thus allowing the neo-Marxists to exploit him. Meanwhile, soldiers are returning from the front lines addicted to a new drug that may be the source of power fueling the new station and one of them may have been put through the space/time rift with the son-in-law. In addition, everyone is armed. Furthermore, any display of unauthorized hostility will result in immediate deadly force usually via high-powered automatic rifles operated by veterans now employed as private security guards and installed on every rooftop. Lastly, the city is about to riot. Also, everyone has access to real-time mapping technology, spy satellite images, closed-broadcast security cameras, and powerful underground broadcast capacity.

Here we have an open system without points but with innumerable variables. The movie I am describing, Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2007), is not paranoiac. It is not

true that each group holds a clue to a larger truth. There is no larger truth. There are only multifarious goals, misunderstood allegiances, and manifold consequences. Nor is there a cathartic revolution: the explosions that close the film catalyze a phase transition but they do not establish power in one quadrant. To adapt Foucault's phrase, "power is [still] everywhere" (*History* 93). Rather, the (singular) "truth" is exactly what each group competes to establish in order to effect local alterations in what everyone in the film acknowledges is a messy, tangled, distributed, populous, and speedy assemblage of forces. Things move – fast. Politics happens in the future, so control over the future means knowing how that assemblage will redistribute before it redistributes, which in turn means taking a hand in its redistribution. And predication, in this centrifugal environment, is apt to be wrong. Against the closed system characteristic of harmed futurity in which parts may be rearranged or delayed but never fully extricated or transformed, this open system is incessantly trading parts in and out, fluctuating, deforming and reforming. Its behavior is emergent rather than determined. Brian Massumi succinctly summarizes Gilbert Simondon's conception of the emergent or germinal: "A germinal or 'implicit' form cannot be understood as a shape or structure. It is more a bundle of potential functions localized, as a differentiated region, within a larger field of potential. In each region a shape or structure begins to form, but no sooner dissolves as its region shifts in relation to the others with which it is in tension" (*User's* 34). Seen through the amnesiac consciousness of Kelly's protagonist, this dispersion of causality makes each player seem capable of infinite, slippery movement. Untethered in a field of force with no center, he is literally buffeted from one "home" to another, unable to regain any sense of the shape or stability of his world.

The radiant complexity, promiscuous causality and speedy mutations that characterize Kelly's alternate U.S. are frightening and disorienting. Future harm is a reaction to this fright, which still shares in its logic and contributes to its assemblage. I mean those gun-turrets, and the apparatus of security they are. What I am labeling future harm is actually a multiplicity of tactics and enunciations centered on the production and perpetuation of threat that allows for the enclosure of stable centers deserving of protection and carved out from the chaos of the larger milieu. But these centers are peripatetic, located only in relation to immediate threat. Foucault describes security as distinct from disciplinary technologies of isolation, concentration, enclosure and protection. On the contrary, the function of security is to "allow the development of ever-wider circuits" to "let things happen" as they are naturally inclined and, through careful study of things as they really are, to "carve out in reality, as a field of reality, [a] population and its specific phenomena" (*Security* 79). More recently, Massumi has complicated this description of security through his historicizing account of the Bush-era preemption model as a postmodern discursive-material simulation machine. By locating preemption on a continuum with prevention and deterrence, Massumi makes clear their interlocking mechanisms. He begins this article with an eerily appropriate quotation from President George W. Bush, one that might as well have titled Kelly's film:

> If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we

> have entered, the only path to safety is the path to action. And this nation will act.[24]

As is clear in this quotation, deterrence doesn't give way to preemption in a historical surpassing. Rather, as Massumi argues, preemption begins with full epistemological certainty of future events, the deterrence model we've seen in Ballard's story, but rather than creating bulwarks, subsumes threat as its own rationality and attempts to intervene in its emergence. In this preemption model, however, certainty of future events slides across metonymic registers to become certainty of some uncertain future event, for which apprehension will equal both enunciation of a particular threat or population and redistribution of that threat or that population. So, "carving out of reality" as Foucault puts it, collapses the two-stage operation of deterrence (locating the threat, defending against it) into the simultaneous creation and dispersion of a threatening emergent possibility, not to destroy or contain it but to keep it germinal, supple and moving. This "threat-o-genic" (Massumi, "Event" 7) politics, as Massumi calls it, relies on movement as the ground of protection.

Given all this, we might reasonably ask how an environmental politics intent on deterring catastrophe can have any traction against an operative politics that already includes catastrophe as one of a host of techniques. In other words, and more baldly stated, environmental deterrence casts a world of limited operational freedom, such as Ballard's, as its preferred form of sociality; thus the pastoral impulse of environmentalism. Even when that impulse does not predominate, as in E.O. Wilson's

[24] President George W. Bush, address to the nation, September 17, 2002, "The National Security Strategy of the USA," http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html.

elegant description of the Earth as an open system in *The Future of Life*, the rhetoric works to celebrate the present operations of that open system. Wilson writes:

> Earth, unlike the other solar planets, is not in physical equilibrium. It depends on its living shell to create the special conditions on which life is sustainable. The soil, water, and atmosphere of it surface have evolved over hundreds of millions of years to their present conditions by the activity of the biophere, a stupendously complex layer of living creatures whose activities are locked together in precise but tenuous global cycles of energy and transformed organic matter. The biosphere creates our special world anew every day, every minute and holds it in unique, shimmering physical disequilibrium. (39)

In Wilson's account, disequilibrium, rather than balance, provides the harmonious conditions that "create our special world" (39). Most explicitly, this phrase refers to the biosphere and its unique ability to foster life. Lovelock provides us with another sense of what might be special about the world the biosphere provides when he writes: "As individual animals we are not so special, and in some ways the human species is like a planetary disease, but through civilization we redeem ourselves and have become a precious asset for the Earth" (*Revenge* 10). Civilization in the form of modernity may be the agent whose actions have triggered the catastrophic future, but human civilization also redeems itself as the path to "stewardship" (Wilson, *Future* 132): "Because all organisms have descended from a common ancestor, it is correct to say that the biosphere as a whole began to think when humanity was born" (ibid). We might now hazard an answer to the question we posed earlier about the disappearance of ecology from popular

environmentalists' use of the child-figure: current environmental norms allows for the human prosperity that enables civilization. Thus despite the hostility toward anthropocentrism, popular environmentalism recapitulates the central tenet of western Humanist and imperialist discourses: the value of civilization. In this light, it comes as less of a surprise that environmental juridical-legal claims should function in the service of the installation of more gun turrets in order to forge within the open field of preemption pockets of pastoral protection. Yet mercury-like, the catastrophic seeps under the fences of deterrence and mutates the forms of preemption.

What then does the rhetoric of "protection" mean when used to justify security? As Foucault defines it, security develops from a shift in emphasis away from creating immobilities whose boundaries assure protection (for instance, the walled city) toward intervention into a moving and changing assemblage of forces. One way to get at this question is to ask not what "protection" means, but what "protection" does, what forms it takes, for whom it is applied and to whom it refers, with what object of knowledge at its center, and toward what idea of the future? Three loci immediately present themselves: the nation, whether from Soviet missiles or rogue-state terrorists; the body, whether from a super-predator or from a super-virus; and the environment, whether from corporate exploitation or from carbon-footprints. Through the production of threat, a protected area is delimited. Threats are productive of and produced through the bodies they threaten. Nation, health, safety are never more singular, more stolid, more unvarying, then when under threat since solidity is precisely the attribute that catastrophe threatens. Protection, then, continues to refer to bounded entities in whose name security is deployed; the apparatuses of security, by contrast, intervene in crowded, indeterminate fields. In this

palimpsest, catastrophe is both the inevitable result and the justifying scourge because protection only functions alongside the apprehension of complexity characteristic of security systems. The important point here is that there is no such thing as a bounded entity except as a fantasmatic mandate for protection. The nation, the body, the earth are open systems with innumerable variables no matter how many walls sport gun turrets. Indeed, those gun turrets testify to the ineradicable openness of those systems. Not even a dead system is closed. Catastrophe-as-protection leveraged against catastrophe-as-threat will engender further catastrophes.

Catastrophe as protection: This counter-intuitive formulation bears the name apocalypse, the ultimate unveiling of the future's potential for harm which military plans and cultural productions both elaborately routinize, telegraph and enjoin. Although rigorously material, apocalyptic scenarios are fantasies. In his address on "nuclear criticism," Jacques Derrida urges us to keep the discursive, fictional and fantastical production of doomsday scenarios in mind (since doomsday as such "does not exist" ["No" 24] outside these forms): "The nuclear strategy can never do without a sophistry of belief and the rhetorical simulation of a text" (ibid). Text, here, references all the disciplinary and governmental technologies that inform simulation, such as statistical extrapolations of test explosions, contamination maps, educational films, nuclear exchange contingency plans, fallout shelters, even the famous red button with its series of irreversible protocols, as well as the fictional texts that give these technologies flesh. All these anxious attempts to imagine the ramifications of the unimaginable point to the supplementary work of future harm against harmed futurity. Against the possibility of a harmed future, these technologies carve out specific sites of future harm and provide the

plans for the gun turrets. Chance, change, catastrophe as overturning, are exactly what protection protects against through the fantasy of a fully formed future already present in the present. However, chance, change and catastrophe are also the repurposed tools of that protection.

In "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," Octavia Butler gives us one way into this question. The teenagers in her short story live with foreshortened expectations of the future because they have Duryea-Gode disease, a hereditary illness that strikes in mid-life and causes its sufferers to try to skin themselves and those alive around them. Clinics, on the grounds of mental wards and functioning in much the same way, rely on physical restraint to keep the patients from mutilating themselves. This tactic works for only so long. This earlier treatment of DGD, reminiscent of Foucault's discussions of the disciplinary regimes around madness, has in the present of the story been supplemented by the discovery that dietary restrictions can control some aspects of the illness. Unlike the carceral wards, the diet is self-administered and self-selecting; only those whose time has not yet come benefit from it. It is a kind of management of the body through the chemical processes of digestion that counters the DGD-body's wayward self-regard by addressing that body as a dynamic process.

The origins of the disease aptly match this solution. Two generations before the story's present, Hedeon Laboratories had developed a drug, Hedeonco:

> The magic bullet, the cure for a large percentage of the world's cancer and a number of serious viral diseases – and the cause of Duryea-Gode disease. If one of your parents was treated with Hedeonco and you were conceived after the treatment, you had DGD. (Butler, "Evening" 406)

DGD is a designer disease, then, built into the germ-line of its carriers; or rather the after-effect of the attempt to create immobilities within mobile systems was the creation of another sort of mobile system. Arresting the body's capacity to produce mutations reframed the body itself as a mutation, a hostile imprisonment. The story narrates the discovery of yet a third complex system working outside of the agency of the subject. As the Dilg center, an endowed hospital for DGD-patients and a research laboratory for a cure for the cure, they stumble upon the realization that male DGDs respond strongly to the pheromonal signatures of cetain female DGDs, ones who inherited their DGD-linked gene from both parents. Dilg specializes in instrumentalizing pheromone links as a form of control. Rather than disciplining their patients, Dilg doctors control their patients simply by being there and lacing their instruction and commands with the pheromones they cannot help but produce.

Butler's story makes poignantly clear the identity of protection and harm, both of which discursively enshroud the same material force. Their tangency, however, does not mean that they are equivalent. Instead, Butler's story – like Derrida's example of the bomb – dramatizes the stakes of mobilizing targeted harm into order to carve out zones of protection within mobile systems. Perhaps this is less apparent in the case of ecological ruin. We are willing, though, to admit that that the violence of state power is used to protect against violence to the body politic or that discourses around catastrophic illness are contained through discourses of protective illness via pathologization of risk behaviors, both of which are easily turned into apocalyptic endgames of their own. Can the same be said of what Derrida calls "the destruction of survivance"("No" 28) that is the apocalyptic endgame of ecological crisis? Does popular environmentalism, which

employs the same structuring narrative as nuclear holocaust and global pandemic, also conjoin harm and protection?

V

Shining through all of these examples is the face of the (human) child in whose name protection is waged. That face is not the face of a real child, but of a figure, a metonym, for the extension of the human into the future, a point made extensively in the next chapter. The reverse side of this face is the apocalyptic endgame each threat immediately conjures: Mutually assured destruction, pandemic infection, and planetary heat-death. In short, what Kafka called "not the last day, but the very last day." Protection here is protection against harmed futurity, future D.O.A. Like the mob, it is right over the horizon and getting closer. The mushroom cloud and the face of the child are posed against each other, as an either/or proposition. Yet, there is a curious symmetry between them. Both are essentially blank, cleared of contingency, messiness and unpredictability.

Deracinating decimation as fantasy. This empty future is the subject of Lee Edelman's attack on "reproductive futurism." This phrase has several valences for Edelman: the conjunction of the figure of the child with the trope of the future; the promise – infinitely deferred – that there will be a time in time which won't be the present; the imperative to replicate the present into the future in the hopes that the future won't come. Reproductive futurism, then, is a two-sided salvation narrative: someday the future will be redeemed of the mess our present actions foretell; until then, we must keep the messy future from coming by replicating the present through our children. In *No Future*, Edelman argues for a "derealization of the order of meaning that futurism produces" (28) since the future envisioned by reproductive patrimony (the fantasized and

actual extension of the humanist human into the future) is no future at all. By this he means that the fantasy of a clean future actively seeks to thwart (protect against) contingency, against the coming of a future that is neither a descendent of the present nor a salvific redemption of the present. The clean future of descent, ostensibly the object of protection that necessitates weapons like the nuclear bomb, shares with the dead future a refusal of those disorienting flows that characterize open systems.

The conjunction of the child with the future is never clean, however, since the child is not a guarantee of replication. Rather, the figure of the child "enacts a logic of repetition that fixes identity through identification with the future of the social order" (Edelman, *No Future* 25). Physiological reproduction must be made to mean replication. As in the diacritical relationship between protection and security, the child as fantasy figure protects against potentiality, while actual children must be made to identify with futurism's desire for orderly progression, thus assuring those grandchildren who are so often found in political speeches and in popular environmentalist rhetoric. The child never more fully fulfills his function as emblem of reproduction than when his innocence is threatened and is open to protection and management. Thus the implicit doubling of the book's title: Yes, Edelman is positioned toward what his critics call "the antisocial thesis" in queer theory but "no future" also refers to the death drive he sees operating within, and tearing apart, a heteronormative futurity in thrall to reproduction.[25] The figure of the child stands in for a futurity that strips the future of everything but repetition and yet insists that repetition is progress. No future indeed. The blank face of the child, the blank face of

[25] Edelman's work has been greeted with skepticism. For a sense of the debate, see "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 819 – 828.

decimation, perfect health or perfect destruction, are preferable to – and modes of controlling – non-repetitive futures.

Ranged against the figure of the child is the sinthomosexual, a word Edelman derives and neologizes from Lacan. The sinthome is fantasy's catachresis, its areferential aporia, which "determines the exchange of signifiers … admits of no translation of its singularity and therefore carries nothing of meaning, recalling in this the letter as the site at which meaning comes undone" (Edelman, *No Future* 35). The force of the bomb is the paradigmatic sinthome, utterly resistant to meaning in its capacities but incessantly the target of figurative labor. The sinthome must be brought back into futurism's fold by becoming a part of its "generational succession, temporality and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition" (60). Internal to futurism but of a different order, capable of turning the seams of reality inside out, apocalyptic endgames are the volte-face of protection. In the name of the future, we must be protected from the future. For Edelman, recognizing the function of the sinthome as the basis upon which narrative coherence is possible is the revolutionary instant. I'd like to posit instead that the child and the sinthome, ostensibly antagonistic, are the twin poles of catastrophic narratives. Ricocheting between absolute meaning and the threat of non-meaning provides coherence of a particularly overwrought style that actively shapes the future as neither salvific nor decimated but threatened.

Compare the examples of reproductive futurism we have seen so far from Edelman and from popular environmentalist writings to Lynn Margulis' discussion of symbiogenesis:

> of all of the organisms on Earth today, only prokaryotes (bacteria) are individuals. All other live beings ("organisms" – such as animals, plants and fungi) are metabolically complex communities of a multitude of tightly organized beings. That is, what we generally accept as an individual animal, such as a cow, is recognizable as a collection of various numbers and kinds of autopoietic entities that, functioning together, form an emergent entity – the cow. "Individuals" are all diversities of co-evolving associates. Said succinctly, all organisms larger than bacteria are intrinsically communities. (qtd in Hird, *Origins* 65)

Myra Hird, in her *Origins of Sociable Life,* went to Margulis' symbiogenesis theory to provide new descriptions of sexed materiality. What she found instead was that the individualization of the gene by neo-Darwinists like Richard Dawkins, so rhetorically familiar from the figure of the child in environmentalism, has little if any material basis. On the contrary, sex defined as gene recombination need not ever produce a new individual at all (Hird 96), and even when it does that individual neither replicates the past into the future since it is not a clone and nor is really definable in terms of individuality, as the rhetorical prominence of the "selfish gene" already demonstrates. The insistence of individuality, however, accords well with the legal and juridical demand for a rational subject to petition the law.

VI

In *States of Injury,* her 1995 critique of rights-based political activism, Wendy Brown asks if it is possible to petition for the redress of historical exclusions from state protection without "recourse to the white masculine middle-class ideal" (61) and "its

bourgeois norm of social acceptance, legal protection, and relative material comforts" (60) that is the basis for many "claims to injury and exclusion" (61). Her point is not that these privations are unworthy of redress, but rather that they appeal to "an ostensible universal" (65) from which they were excluded. This has two effects. On the one hand, "we are invited to seek equal deference – equal blindness from – but not equalizing recognition from the state" (56). On the other hand, the demand for inclusion into universal protection (a universality the claim begins by contesting) relies on and inscribes in law the reality of exclusion. This argument paradoxically creates the "foreclosure of its own freedom, [via] its impulse to inscribe in the law and in other political registers its historical and present pain" (66) thus fixing politicized identities – and not the qualities of exclusion, exploitation or domination that they refer to – as universal and ahistorical premises of the law.[26] Brown picks up on Foucault's analysis of discipline to assert that the inscription of identity into law encourages the minute specification, surveillance and normatization of types. As material-discursive practice, the law particularizes and stabilizes certain identity formations formerly excluded from the universal (and therefore in need of special recognition) without recognizing the mobility of forms of domination; it grants rights against the future.

"For our greater well-being," writes Sandy Irvine, "we already accept all kinds of restrictions on the right of individuals to do whatever he or she feels like: highway codes,

[26] This reinscription of "historical and present pain" as "wounded attachment" to political identity has three consequences: "It produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt)" (68). The flexibility and areferential mobility of this form of political agitation is attested to by its wholesale cooptation by the White House after the 2001 terrorist attacks, and by the charges of reverse discrimination leveled by white men at institutions utilizing affirmation action protocols.

fire regulations, crimes against person and property. There can be no greater crime against posterity than to permit the present slide to environmental disaster to continue" ("Against" 221). Irvine is not alone in advocating protective policing for the greater good of the environment. Garrett Hardin emphatically promotes the use of Federal regulation to curb population increase. In his view, the common reaction against these sorts of proposals hinges on the implied loss of freedom. However, he argues, "Every new infringement of the commons involves the infringement of someone's personal liberty …. Individuals locked into the logic of the commons are free only to bring universal ruin; once they see the necessity of mutual coercion, they become free to pursue other goals" ("Tragedy" 197).[27] In this analysis, rights for some always involve restriction for others, for instance an endangered species designation restricts the freedom to hunt in favor of the species' right (synonymous here with freedom) to exist.

In Brown's analysis, it is the right that affixes its own restrictions through disciplinary technologies of designation, taxonomy, normalization, oversight, and regulation. In the 1964 "Wilderness Act," for instance, nature is defined by set parameters that highlight the absence of human activity. Wilderness "generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable" ("Wilderness" 174).[28] Importantly, the claim here is not that "man-made" technology is prohibited, but that its results should be "substantially unnoticeable." Current "rewilding" paradigms use benevolent intervention to counteract

[27] The word "commons" reference those lands or resources historically open to all users. See Irvine and Hardin.
[28] Wilderness Act, 1964. Several important books and articles published in the last few years address the problem with wilderness as an environmental value. See particularly Cronin, Byerly, Morton, and Phillips.

the effects of ecological devastation, thus returning nature to a state of wilderness via probability scenarios intended to direct future arrangements.[29] Such intervention, however, assumes knowledge of future conditions coextensive with present conditions. Examples like loss of biodiversity, toxification of land, air and water, polar ice melt and coastline disappearance, are all processes that do not end with catastrophe but move through catastrophe to as yet unidentifiable futures and yet they are treated as if the millennia of co-evolutionary forces have ceased operations in the face of man's irresistible entropy production. Legislating against the contributing causes of these phenomena forecloses unforeseen emergent behaviors, fixes in law the meaning they presently hold, and disregards the law's areferential mobility. As I have already alluded to earlier in this work, fixing the future for the sake of the present dovetails with those corporate initiatives whose green goals defend their reliance on a docile nature.

The practices of healing and redress, of maneuver and legislation, produce a "wounded attachment" to the future that encloses it, fixes it, reifies it as already known by collapsing effects into causes.[30] The future is already here in the form of a symptom of danger to come. More – the symptom is itself dangerous, is already the harm it will be. In this prolepsis, the real fear is revealed as the openness – not the harm – of the future. Harmed futurity makes dead the future; future harm carries out the material work of its execution.

VII

[29] This term has been popularized by Dave Foreman of the Wildlands Project. See *The Rewilding Project* (www.rewilding,org).
[30] This phrase is Brown's adaptation of Friedrich Nietzsche's "bad conscience." See the chapter "'Guilt' and 'Bad Conscience'" from his *Genealogy of Morals*.

Is there then, as Edelman suggests, no viable way to consider the future? Is futurity always of a piece with patrimony? On the contrary, I argue that the prevalence of the fantasy of a harmed future is indicative of our intense awareness of continuing mutations and movements, of material futurity. The ostensible obsolescence of evolution, which structures ecological doomsday scenarios, is a reaction to its continuing operation. Denying the continuing effect of evolution is a strategic component of harmed futurity's narrative arc, because it asserts that *these forms, these relationships* are the only ones we have. Get out of the scale of the human, project outward and forward toward the interpenetration and co-evolution of all planetary life, organic and inorganic, or inward and forward to our messy, permeable and permeated interiors, fast-forward past functionalist definitions (eyes are formed for seeing; hands for grasping) or blur together individuals so they look like one crazy-quilt organism, and the results seem less like the blank emptiness of total death and more like the abundance of potential.

Sexual reproduction is the motor of evolution, or so Charles Darwin is often understood to be arguing. *The Origin of Species*, however, is a strangely divided text, full of irreconcilable tendencies. His infamous use of words like competition, extinction, and superiority, which accorded so well with the prevailing zeitgeist of laissez-faire capitalism, combined with the legacy of social Darwinism, has made Darwin seem like an apologist for the status quo.[31] His assertion that progress in speciation can be charted

[31] Social Darwinism has morphed into neo-Darwinism in recent years. While neo-Darwinists like Richard Dawkins seem to have gotten the most popular attention and institutional support, a new wave of scholars have recently begun to craft a "queer Darwinism" more in line with this project's methods. While, to my knowledge, no full-length works have yet been published on this subject, queer ecology has seen much recent interest. See the May 1994 Queer Nature issue of *Undercurrents: Critical Environmental Studies.* For the queer non-human, see Hird, *Queering*.

according to "the standard of high organization, the amount of differentiation and specialization of the several organs in each being when adult" (*Origin* 149) certainly seems to privilege the human as the largest, most robust, most dominant, and most highly organized of animals. However, a careful reading reveals a series of fissures radiating outward from Darwin's appreciation of the fluidity of form.

"We have good reason to believe," he writes, "that changes in the conditions of life give a tendency to increased variability, and … this would manifestly be favorable to natural selection, by affording a better chance of the occurrence of profitable variations" (Darwin, *Origin* 122). By "changes in the conditions of life," Darwin offers examples like increased competition, climate fluctuations, human intervention (such as domestication), geographic isolation, food decrease or increase. What is remarkable in this list is its lack of moral judgment. Loss and gain, isolation and competition, make for favorable conditions for the emergence of mutation.[32] Where, though, does emergence emerge from? Here we encounter a foundational schism. Darwin emphatically denies "the continued creation of any new organic beings, or of any great and sudden modification in their structure" (132). The first part of this claim is obviously intended to underscore his theory of descent, which claims that the production of new species is a process of incremental and preserved variation. Accordingly, the part responsible for variation must be present, but without relevance, in the originating individuals. For instance, the honeybees with the longest proboscis will flourish if changes in the plant require a new method of penetration. That variation will be preserved through natural

[32] Darwin elaborates: "Nature, if I may be allowed to personify the natural preservation or survival of the fittest, cares nothing for appearances, except in so far as they are useful to any being" (122). What "usefulness" denotes is determined by the total ecological context, not by a teleological endpoint.

selection and inherited through sexual selection. On the other hand, he asserts "the ordinary belief that the amount of possible variation is a strictly limited quantity is likewise a simple assumption" (Darwin, *Origin* 123). How do these two positions articulate? Through "the law of correlation, [which states that] when one part varies, and the variations are accumulated through natural selection, other modifications, often of the most unexpected nature, will ensue" (124). These variations are not amplifications of existing possibilities, but wholly new structures and capacities. If we expand this to relationships rather than individuals, it becomes clear that the pressures of modification are everywhere at work. In this close coupling of organic and inorganic life, form and species are just the momentary expressions of a potentially inexhaustible mutation. As Grosz writes,

> What evolves are not individuals or even species, which are forms of relative fixity or stability, but oscillations of differences (which underlie and make possible individuals and species) that can consolidate themselves, more or less temporarily, into cohesive groupings only to disperse and disappear or else reappear in other terms at different times. (*Nick* 24)[33]

[33] Elizabeth Grosz's recent work, from which this quotation is drawn, is a stunning re-evaluation of Darwin, Nietzsche and Bergson from the perspective of temporal mutation. The following quotation might be taken as the work's thesis: "Nietzsche serves … as a corrective to contemporary Darwinism, which has sought, beyond the boldness of Darwin's own conjectures, a security that the knowledge of the past and present will preempt and provide us with knowledge of the future, that time is regular, predictable, knowable. What Nietzsche makes clear is that such a knowledge is possible only with the freezing, the arresting of the active dynamism of the will to power, that is, with freezing and thus killing life itself" (111).

These dispersions of form are, of course, catastrophic; they are also the movements of life from out of which coalesce new relationships.

The insistence on a rapidly collapsing future favors fixity of form. The future that environmental policies aim to preserve is a future fit for life as it is presently lived against the emergence of the new. Grosz defines Darwin's contribution in terms of events, a word closely aligned with my use of the term catastrophe:

> In recognizing the surprising, unpredictable, and mobile force of time on the emergence and development of the multitude of forms of life, Darwin brings the concept of the *event* to the sciences. Events are ruptures, nicks, which flow from causal connections in the past but which, in their unique combinations and consequences, generate unpredictability and effect sometimes subtle but wide-ranging, unforeseeable transformations in the present and future. (*Nick* 8)

The human may be the most highly developed animal, but Darwin is always careful to recognize that strength, utility and dominance are relative to the contingent demands of the broader ecological context. What will count as strong and useful in the future "no man can predict, for we know that many groups formerly most extensively developed have now become extinct" (148). Life is not a thing, but a relational force. Autopoetic or allopoetic, organic or nonorganic, human or animal or posthuman or neoanimal, all are forms life takes up in its movement.

Ecological suicide is a doomsday scenario whose maintenance requires the production of simulations. Its corollary rhetoric of protection requires the production of

statistical extrapolations, disciplinary techniques of self-governance and juridico-legal intervention. It is a discourse of harmed futurity with its attendant technologies of future harm. It renders the future dead via prognostication. Doomsday scenarios preserve the dead future against what Nietzsche would call overcoming.

The following chapters consider more closely what this queer ethics of catastrophe might entail, but for now I want to specify some of what I do not mean for this phrase to designate. First, to the extent that an ethics begins from the perspective of a subject's relationship to an other, whether a single other like another person or a dense other like a quandary or an ecosphere, it falls outside of the range of the catastrophic, which is precisely not interfaced to or in dialogue with a subject's decisions, thoughts or desires. Instead of a subject's reasoned ethical relation to the world, I want to invoke, with Barad, an ethics grounded in a very partial and limited agency. Since "the very nature of materiality is an entanglement" (*Meeting* 393) in Barad's thesis, then responsibility as responsiveness adheres prior to any act of will superadded to or adduced from above the messy, speedy and mutational plane.

Chapter II

Rescue and Reproductive Futurism

"Rhetoric is the ash of discourse."
Samuel R. Delany[1]

I

In an article on feminist science fiction, Veronica Hollinger warns against taking gender too seriously as an analytic category. Citing the queer theoretical insight that gender is a second-order effect of compulsory heterosexuality, Hollinger argues for close attention to the rhetorical forms that solidify subjectivity. She writes:

> In our struggle against a monolithic patriarchy – which is, after all, a kind of theoretical fiction produced, in part, by the very feminism aligned against it – we risk reinscribing, however inadvertently, the terms of compulsory heterosexuality within our own constructions. ("(Re)reading" 303)

Joanna Russ's writings insistently present the "imaginative challenges to the smoothly oiled technologies of heternormativity" (302) that Hollinger advocates. As Judith Spector notes, Russ's protagonists "are no longer interested in being creatures of gender designed for procreative purposes" ("Dr. Jekyll" 371). Reproductive destiny is a key strand in the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. Yet reproduction has a double valence, neither side of which is by itself equivalent to physiological procreation. In the epistemology of heterosexual gendering, reproduction names the imagined site of fulfillment.[2] An odd

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[1] Delany, *Longer* 144.

[2] This temporality recalls the Freudian Oedipal narrative, which Teresa de Lauretis (*Alice*) describes in this way: "The end of the girl's journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting him, Prince

temporality, however, makes reproduction in this sense the permanent deferral of fulfillment. As Russ puts it in *The Female Man*:

> Besides, what about the children? Mothers have to sacrifice themselves to their children, both male and female, so that the children will be happy when they grow up; though the mothers themselves were once children and were sacrificed to in order that they might grow up and sacrifice themselves for their children, so you begin to wonder whether the whole thing isn't a plot to make the world safe for (male) children. But motherhood is sacred and mustn't be talked about. (204)

While Russ's narrator construes this as an elaborate hoax perpetrated on women for the sake of perpetuating male privilege, such a reading partakes in the "theoretical fiction" Hollinger describes. Male privilege may be one result of this process; however, the founding assertion that the present must endlessly attend to the future interpellates men and women alike into sacred and sacrificial reproduction, one highly valued mode of which is procreation. This indicates the second valence of reproduction: repetition. Rhetorical figures like safe children and sacred mothers evoke a nostalgic past that each

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Charming. For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of *his* journey. Thus the itinerary of the female's journey, mapped from the very start on the territory of her own body…, is guided by a compass pointing not to reproduction as the fulfillment of *her* biological destiny, but more exactly to the fulfillment of the promise made to 'the little man'" (italics hers, 133). Roof ("Ideology") makes a similar point by recourse to laws regarding copyright and legal custody, showing how both privilege male ownership of creative and procreative issue. My argument is intended to highlight the shared complicity, or what de Lauretis calls "seduction" (137), of both men and women in overvaluing individualized responsibility to the future. This might help explain why stories such as Russ's, which reverse the Oedipal metanarrative by assigning active questing to female characters, are only partially successful in avoiding patriarchy. Indeed, I would argue that *We Who Are About To…* is such an upsetting novel because it posits the failure of reversing the Oedipal metanarrative without also rethinking futurity.

person must labor to restore in the future through childbirth. Reproduction in its valence as repetition makes procreation mean in this way. In other words, compulsory heterosexuality reproduces at the level of the subject the epistemology latticing its assumptions: first, that procreation will guarantee reproduction of the past into the future and, second, that reproduction-via-procreation is the sovereign task of each individual. For all its ostensible biological underpinnings, procreation becomes the sign of reproduction – the endless labor for fulfillment in the future. To refuse gender "designed for procreative purposes" is to refuse gender and its design; that is, it is to refuse reproducing reproduction, not procreation as such. In this discussion, I argue that the conflation of reproduction with procreation results in the often-toxic assumption that the refusal to procreate is a repudiation of futurity.

I borrow the term "reproductive futurism" from Lee Edelman's recent work on the homophobia embedded in the child-figure. In *No Future*, Edelman addresses the homophobic accusation that queer sexuality's attachment to pleasure without issue promotes deathliness. His answer, that we should embrace that accusation, has engendered much critical hostility. While I cannot fully recount the conversation here, the rancor of this debate suggests the broad appeal of reproduction, even for people who suffer as a consequence of this ideology. Much of my discussion aims at extending his assertion that reproductive futurism unifies even apparently opposed political positions. While my work owes much to him, I do not see the ready solution to this problem in the total rejection of futurity he promotes. Rather, I would like to propose through my reading of Russ's 1977 novel *We Who Are About To*… that futurity can be imagined outside of reproduction and indeed outside of human agency. I turn to Russ's novel to

expose the binding work performed by reproduction-as-futurity and to offer a compelling alternative.

The question of reproduction has rightly held a central place in feminist thought. In urging her feminist readers to locate compulsory heterosexuality as a political institution rather than a biological imperative or personal choice, Adrienne Rich poses the following question: "Why [have] species-survival, the means of impregnation and emotional-erotic relationships … become so rigidly identified with each other?" ("Compulsory" 637). While many scholars writing in the thirty years since her article's publication have interrogated compulsory heterosexuality, the supreme value of species-survival as a discursive technology of compulsory heterosexuality has not received the same attention. While many scholars have written about fetal representation in abortion politics, few of them directly interrogate anxieties around human futurity as a tactic in abortion rhetoric.[3] Rich's question intimates that species-survival designates an individual obligation to a collective human and non-human future. As I argue below, the critical reception of *We Who Are About To…*, like the debate around Edelman's polemic, warns that this individualized obligation to survival sits uneasily alongside the critique of patriarchy.

II

We Who Are About To… centers on a small group of interstellar commuters stranded on an uncharted planet with no hope of rescue. Meaningless in itself, this crash violently negates the futures they had imagined for themselves, jolting them into dizzying epistemological uncertainty. Against this uncertainty, the commuters attempt to fence in

[3] But see Weingarten, *Genealogies*.

the future by invoking the familiar narrative tradition of the frontier settlement where human civilization might take root and their lost futures be, if not quite restored, at least redeemed. This rooting of civilization, they decide, seemingly without discussion, must happen through childbirth. Reproduction functions as a metonymy for a restored future as well as a mechanism for reinstituting patriarchal hierarchy. Remarkably, the breeding plan is not a covert attempt by the male passengers to secure the sexual services of the female passengers. Administered by committee, and endorsed by everyone except the novel's narrator, this compulsory heterosexuality construes the future as the imperative of the present and turns procreation into an instrument of reproduction.

This consensus forms outside of the narrator's observation and since we have access to their story through her voice-recorded diary entries, we at first know only that the commuters quickly begin to see themselves as colonizers. Successful colonization, their primary goal, does not mean successful survival, as might be expected, but survival for the sake of reproducing civilization through childbirth. Before they even step from their landing module, the narrator begins to list the reasons why they will fail. She notes that they literally have no foundation on which to base their actions: "A few weeks observation and perhaps we can guess if we're approaching the summer solstice or going the other way around, which could give us some idea of how long the seasons will be: could be ten years of summer" (14). This cynical empiricism marks her as an outsider and troublemaker. Yet the others cannot simply ignore her or allow her to die by herself as she wishes to do. Instead, they try to force her to join them in their breeding plan. And so she kills them and – some seventy pages later – herself.

The narrator's refusal to participate in the breeding plan would seem to make her a heroic figure, or at least a figure espousing a political position recognizable to feminist readers. Even apart from this register, the novel's topos is political in the most rigorous sense, concerned with the establishment of governance, the right to bodily autonomy, the legitimacy of violent struggle, and the relationship of human life to future human life. In its historical context, too, the novel's premise bears directly on second-wave feminist demands for meaningful work and reproductive rights. Even the generic context of the novel indicates political engagement, as the novel refuses the triumphal tonality traditionally associated with science fictional colonization narrative. Taken together, these three registers ask the reader to consider whether the establishment of social order via women's procreative capacity has been a foundational condition of human sociality. Equally important, the equation of procreation with the reproduction of social order asks us to consider whether one of the ideological mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality resides in the shared belief that civilization must be preserved.

Some critics have indeed embraced the narrator's refusal of the reproductive mandate. Yet Samuel R. Delany is right to call *We Who Are About To…* a "dangerous book" (*Longer* 149). This danger, I argue, lies in the novel's apparent polarization of reactions: life and death, the first associated with reproduction and the second with suicide and murder. In attempting to read the novel against the grain, several critics have reversed these values. Brooks Landon[4] situates the novel in terms of conventional depictions of motherhood in formula literature, in which individualized species-survival trumps even the collective survival it signifies. In this analysis, Russ's stranded

[4] Landon, "Eve."

passengers, for whom the reality that rescue will not come acts as a clarion call to colonization, represent standard formula fare against the nameless narrator's queer deathliness. Landon then rereads this deathliness as refusal to conform to the expectations of sacrificial motherhood. Marleen S. Barr argues that the narrator, in choosing death, really chooses life. "Music, books, friends and love" ("Reproducing" 133) are absent from the uncharted and uninhabited planet they seek to colonize and these, not bare survival, are the source of life. Delany implicitly locates the narrator as the novel's subversive element: "Russ suggests that the quality of life is the purpose of living, and reproduction only a reparative process to extend that quality – and not the point of life at all" (*Longer* 148). Of all the characters, only the narrator ever evokes quality of life as a standard for behavior.

Many more critics, however, have found the novel troubling. While Barr, Landon and Delany laud the book for subverting narrative formulas and epistemological expectations based on allegedly natural maternal instinct, other critics have found the novel hopeless, apolitical or nihilistic. While praising the book, Marilyn Hacker, in an early article, describes Russ as compelled to write a novel about death "as a statement of what is, in our time, the ultimate alternative to political commitment" ("Science" 208). Thelma Shinn, in her article on women in science fiction, argues that the novel fails to attain an authentic politics because the narrator stubbornly asserts her individual preferences over the needs of the community, thus "forcing her to become the instrument of destruction" ("Worlds" 211) and indicating that the real murder in this novel is the murder of the colony's future. Barbara Garland, in her brief review article, similarly disparages the novel for rejecting "even the laws of biological survival and of society"

("Joanna" 92). Jean Cortiel's reading, in her monograph on Russ, effectively summarizes the critical reception of this novel when she writes, "*We Who Are About To…* is more about the impossibilities of life than about death" (*Demand* 208). According to the logic of these readings, the colonizers would appear to value life, specifically future human life, regardless of the incongruities of their position and the suffering procreation might entail. In comparison, the narrator's insistence that their position is terminal appears at best juvenile and at worst homicidal. For these scholars, the novel represents a retreat from political engagement because the narrator's choice violates the ground of political action itself: the commitment to survival.[5]

The disjunction between the contents of the novel and the mixed reception of this work intimates that something discomforts this camp of readers. Their disturbing reaction seems to force the conclusion that the future does depend on reproduction, which in turn depends on restricting women's autonomy. Sherry Ortner's essay, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture," published contemporaneously with Russ's novel, corroborates just such a conclusion. In Ortner's anthropological review of traits common to all human social organization, Ortner includes acculturation to "a society of other individuals," "an interest in personal survival" and a commitment to "continuity and survival, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals" (25). In this definition, to be human is to desire survival and reproduction above all else. Russ asks us to consider whether a woman's life, given these universal conditions, is worth living. Indeed, this acceptance of universal, natural oppression might foster the reading of this novel as a

[5] Beyond the scope of this essay, but relevant to this discussion, is Russ's engagement with Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover Landfall*, first published in 1972. See her response to Vondra McIntyre's review in *The Witch and the Chameleon. We Who Are About To…* can be read as a response to Bradley's novel.

failure of feminist politics.[6] Yet, the recurrent concern for community in these readings points to a different conclusion: namely, that it is exactly the violation of the commitment to "survival and continuity, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals," as Ortner puts it, that informs the monstrous character of this novel. When confronted with the moral choice between a return to a patriarchal order and violent resistance to that order's establishment, these scholars balk at the novel's implication that annihilation is preferable to degradation.

The important point here is that the novel's "pocket genocide" (Russ, *We* 152), as the narrator titles her actions, is ultimately less upsetting than that she murders her companions as a means of resisting future life. By killing off the colonists, by refusing to participate in their breeding plan, the narrator rejects the assertion that human life only acquires meaning by producing future human lives. Here we return to Cortiel's gloss on the novel as "more about the impossibilities of life than about death" (*Demand* 208). We might construe this use of "life" as shorthand for a livable, human life, but we might also understand her usage more broadly: as life in total. A commonplace denotation (i.e. "Life is such a struggle") gives way to the specter of total annihilation, of the impossibility of life in the second sense. This annihilation, however, can't refer to life in the present, since life is not presently impossible (even for the colonists), but to the future. Cortiel allegorizes future life as impossible given the narrator's refusal of the reproductive mandate. In the shadow thrown by the phrase "the impossibilities of life" (Cortiel, *Demand* 208), the validation of the colonists' embrace of the future seems less like

[6] In a series of letters and book reviews written between 1979 and1980 for *Frontiers* journal, Russ registers the joy of isolating, naming and describing universal conditions of women's oppression, despite the fact that they turn out to be identical, in her words, to "the establishment of civilization."

enthusiasm and more like a desperate attempt to secure the future despite the oppressive consequences of that position. Ironically, then, the discomfort induced by this novel looks quite a lot like an endorsement of reproductive futurism, and the "biological laws" that structure women's oppression.

III

While this conclusion is disturbing, I'd like to suggest that embracing the narrator's argument does not take us away from reproductive futurism. Rather, where the antagonism between the two groups should render them structurally opposed, and would therefore lead us to expect that the narrator's concern resides with the present, we find symmetrical concern with the future. This is so, I argue, because the two positions maintain their coherence through each other. As the narrator says: "But they won't be able to leave me alone. I know. Not because of the child-bearing, because of the disagreement. The disagreement is what matters" (Russ, *We* 47). Officially, the group won't let her go because of her procreative value; however, she performs a different and perhaps even more valuable service as scapegoat. Because she has so volubly aligned herself with death, failure and chaos, with the extra-human agency of the alien planet, she comes to stand in for it. The violence the group threatens, like tying her to a tree, aims at marking her difference from them and then incorporating it. Writing in a slightly different context, Robert Reid-Pharr defines the scapegoat in particularly apposite terms for this discussion: "The scapegoat, then, would be the figure who reproduces this undifferentiation, this chaos, this boundarylessness. The violence directed against the goat would mitigate against prior violence, the erosion of borders that has beset the entire community" ("Tearing" 373). Displacing the trauma of the crash onto the narrator

consolidates and gives form to their anxiety, but it doesn't mean that she is complacent. While she scoffs at their procreative fantasy, she builds her own vision of reproduction, one equally attuned to preserving a civilized future.

In one of the few explanations for the breeding plan that the novel offers, for instance, John Ude, the burgeoning patriarch, explains that the narrator can't go searching for water because she, like the other four women, is "too valuable to put in danger" (Russ, *We* 31). In response to the narrator's evasive answer, he reminds her sententiously: "Civilization must be preserved" (31). This commonplace implies that civilization has been threatened, and that they must take action to secure its preservation from that threat. "Civilization," she replies, "is doing just fine. We just don't happen to be where it is" (31). Her rejoinder underscores the distance between a biological explanation for the breeding plan and its function as a political or ideological fantasy. Humanity will not be jeopardized if they choose to die, or to value their own lives over the lives of future generations. Loading the obligation of civilization onto the eight stranded strangers puts in place a new goal, the only one with enough force to mitigate their loss, and at the same time replicates at the level of the collective the individual romance narrative that similarly concludes with childbirth and the hope of perpetuation. On the other hand, any civilization they might build would not be civilization in the sense they recognize, as the narrator reminds them through a series of rhetorical questions: "Do you want your children to live in the Old Stone Age? Do you want them to forget how to read? Do you want to lose your teeth? Do you want your great-grandchildren to die at thirty?" (25). At which point, Cassie, who wants to bear children, hits her. Where Cassie and the others imagine childbearing as an abstract good, a disembodied method for resuscitating

civilization, the narrator insists on its material consequences. Yet, her version similarly delimits and reifies the future. Rather than actual material consequences, the possibilities she lists stand in metonymically for a harmed life, one that, like losing civilization, must be prevented at any cost.

Of all the colonists, Ude most represents reproductive futurism's investment in repetition. In attempting to tempt the others onto the planet, he crafts a figure of the Earth as both a sacrificing mother and a justification for further sacrifice.

> Come on now, come on dearies … it's like Earth. And we know Earth. Most of us were born on it. So what's there to be afraid of, hey? We're just colonizing a little early, that's all. You wouldn't be afraid of Earth, would you? (20)

The narrator sees clearly that Ude's encouraging speech invokes "Earth" not as a physical place but as a social and symbolic space, as a mother ("born on it") who cares for her children. The only "Earth," however, that the colonists know how to survive in is the one they left, where food is purchased, energy comes out of a wall socket, and medical technology is at least minimally available. In other words, on their Earth, survival denotes something beyond livingness. As our narrator tartly replies, another vision of Earth might serve as a more apt analogy:

> Oh, sure. Think of Earth. Kind old home. Think of the Artic. Think of Labrador. Of Southern India in June. Think of smallpox and plague and earthquakes and ringworms and pit vipers. Think of a nice case of poison ivy all over you, including your eyes. Status asthmaticus. Amoebic dysentery. The Minnesota pioneers who tied a rope from the house to the

> barn in winter because you could lose your way in a blizzard and die three feet from the house. Think (while you're at it) of tsunamis, liver fluke, the Asian brown bear. Kind old home. The sweetheart. The darling place. Think of Death Valley … in August. (20)

Remarkably, in attempting to undermine the frontier fantasy she sees coalescing around her, the narrator deploys a congruent discourse of futurity. The accuracy of her description, and its bitter majesty against Ude's clearly symbolic use of Earth, obfuscates its directive: think only of what might go wrong. She might have included autumn leaves, sunsets and beaches in her list and still have had an accurate description of Earth. Instead, the narrator's sense that they are already dead collapses harm that may or may not be in the future into the present. In effect, the planet has already killed them, since she perceives the only life it offers as guaranteed to harm them. No less than for the colonizers, the present serves only as a measure of the future. She doesn't oppose civilizational discourse, in fact she repeats it in the form of its other: nature's malignity.

Moreover, the narrator has no immunity to the symbolic power of their home planet. Meditating on her decision to die, she compares her reaction to the current situation to how she might feel were she on Earth:

> If Earth had been hit by plague, by fire, by war, by radiation, sterility, a thousand things, you name it, I'd still stand by her; I love her; I would fight every inch of the way there because my whole life is knit to her. And she'd need mourners. To die on a dying Earth – I'd live, if only to weep. (27)

Like Ude, the narrator personifies Earth. In so doing, she replaces his Oedipal scene with the quite different and specifically non-reproductive metaphor of female lovers. This shift, however, obscures the work of personification: To turn the planet into a person. While her earlier characterization of Earth presents nature as a fierce antagonist to human survival, here the narrator conflates human and non-human nature and makes "Earth" a synecdoche for social order and human futurity, especially via procreation. Fire, war, radiation, sterility – these are human troubles, civilizational troubles. In this description, the narrator identifies Earth's death with its sudden hostility to human futurity.[7] In effect, dying on a dying Earth is just what she is doing, since her opposition to procreation is an attempt to preserve the reproduction of civilization. To make this fantasy work, she must insist on the virulence of the future.

One particularly provocative moment in the novel occurs at the pinnacle of the group's attempt to convert the narrator to their breeding plan, when Ude rhetorically questions the narrator's desire for death: "Really," he says, "I cannot understand why you want to die" (46). She has, at this point in the novel, not yet announced her plan to suicide. Rather, Ude's statement assumes that her refusal to allow the possibility of survival and the desirability of colonization amounts to suicide. Her reply reverses the terms of this assumption by asserting that life lived for the future is not life at all:

> John Donne, John-John-with-your-britches-on, John Whittington-turn-again-lord-mayor-of-London-town, we *are* dead. We died the minute we crashed. Plague, toxic food, deficiency diseases, broken bones, infection,

[7] In a compelling, but ultimately unconvincing, reading of this novel, Patrick Murphy ("Suicide" 129) argues that the narrator is engaged in a heroic defense of the alien planet's ecology.

> gangrene, cold, heat, and just plain starvation …. My God, you're the ones who want to suffer: conquer and control, conquer and control, when you haven't even got stone spears. You're dead …. Galvanism, Corpse jerking. Planning. Power. Inheritance. You know, survival. My genes shall conquer the world. That's death. (46)

Here, the narrator makes her critique of reproduction explicit. She does not oppose childbirth as much as what it means: "Planning. Power. Inheritance." Yet her own list of potential harm hinges on planning and power. She, too, has plans that she will enforce, likewise premised on survival, though with a different object in mind. This collapse of probability into certainty, no less a reaction to epistemological disorientation than the other colonists', ultimately leads to her murders.[8] Certain that the future has already been harmed, she attempts to control the damage. Thus the murders merely complete what the crash began.

Even her syntax reflects this slippage. For instance, she describes Nathalie digging a latrine like this: "Nathalie's digging experimental sanitation pits with a collapsible shovel. And every once in a while it does" (21). She records these events after they happen, at night so the others won't hear her; she is already in command of the plot. The reader, on the other hand, reads as if it were the present. The ambiguity of the second sentence in the above quotation sends the reader back to the first sentence to establish what thing she is referring to and what it does. This return puts in the past of the reading

[8] In "Exterminating Fetuses: Abortion, Disarmament and the Sexo-Semiotics of Extraterrestialism," Zoe Sofia argues that the collapsed future is a mainstay of science fiction. Her reading of male reproductive metaphors as a form of technological determinism against the "generative energies in non-heterosexuals and others who choose not to reproduce themselves" (58) is clearly close to the argument I am pursuing here.

time an event (the collapse) that hasn't happened yet in the narration, though it has in the narrator's experience. This recursive style structures the narrative. Yet, I would argue that this particular usage by no means accidentally involves a literal and temporal collapse. This syntactic reversal intimates a more pivotal reversal: she who predicts harm becomes the harm she predicts.

This is a shocking novel, but it isn't nihilistic or apolitical. Rather, this shock aims to reveal the shared commitment to human futurity that binds together political movements of all kinds and couples resistance to oppression through a common, but commonly unstated, boundary. On one side, potential catastrophe marks the limit of political resistance. No matter how oppressive its organization, survival of the social body remains paramount. On the other side, the height of political power resides in futurity and the triumphal revivification of the body politic in that future. Both positions sacralize future life for its own sake, and not for the particular lives that might be led in that future. For all that the narrator appears to reject futurity, ultimately through suicide, her obsessive cataloguing of possible future harm reveals her shared commitment to the future. For all her insistence that civilization will be fine without their help, she sacrifices her life to prevent the degradation of civilization. Russ's critics are right to see in this novel a pessimistic evaluation of political struggle: movement between these two poles isn't movement at all.

The homology between the novel's own apparent polarization and the critical bifurcation I have mapped should therefore give us pause. As Delany implies, in the same essay cited earlier, the narrator only appears to offer an opposing position. He names her "the most 'civilized' person among the passengers" (*Longer* 149), but then clarifies the

definition of civility through Walter Benjamin's aphorism "Every act of civilization is also an act of barbarism" (149). While the novel does challenge the ease with which procreation becomes synonymous with reproduction and its attendant metaphysics of futurity, progress and life, I contend that that critique comes to us not through the narrator's defection from the group, or her fatalism toward their survival, but from the novel's own organization. Rejecting the ostensible choice the novel offers allows a third possibility to emerge.

IV

Consider the novel's title: *We Who Are About To….* The novel's first line – "About to die, and so on" (7) – appears to conclude the anticipatory temporality of the title, to fulfill the death already intimated by the allusion to the Latin salute.[9] The structure these two lines create together, however, is not linear but chiasmic. By replacing the specificity of a verb with the ellipses, the title enunciates not an act but a condition: the awaiting of the future as the infinitely delayed time of conclusion. The first phrase of the first line offers a false resolution of this condition, one that the second phrase immediately undermines. By the time we read these words, the crisis that precipitated them has been averted; they are not "about to die" and so they must "so on." The polarized critical positions map onto the tension between these two originary phrases, but ignore the critique inherent in the title. For the title is playing with the temporality of reproductive futurism. It appears to offer imminent fulfillment, but mischievously replaces it with a condition. Neither parts of the first line signify real resolution. Death, the narrator's answer to threatened civilization, attempts to evade, but

[9] E.g. "We who are about to die salute you."

complies with, the "so on," i.e. repetition. In both, the present becomes the time of wounded openness against which the future must be made to mean fulfillment.

I'd like to suggest a different way to read this "so on." Importantly, the colonists are lost not only in space, but also in time. Genealogical succession, the "so on" of reproduction, derives its meaning-making force from conceiving of time as unfolding in a straight-line running out to meet the horizon. Space travel is already a perversion of this conception of time. As the narrator ruminates, "The light of our dying will reach you (whoever you are) only after you yourselves are long dead, after your own Sun has engulfed you and then shrunk to a collapsed cinder with no more light in it than what we saw that night" (Russ, *We* 19). Sarah Lefanu, in her article on the role of readership in Russ's work, sees this temporal delay as part of the strategic function of the narrator's diary: "In the preservation of the journal, however, there is implied a future community with a reader *inside* language that alleviates her despair to some extent by situating her own perspective as the discursive past of some even more remote future" (her emphasis, "Reader" 252). In what follows, I'd like to suggest that this recuperative reading of a future internal to readership – one which ostensibly escapes from the reproductive mandate I've been tracking thus far – is likewise tied to control over the future. In this case, however, rescuing the future depends on the transmission of proper narrative to the child. I'd like to unfold this phase of my argument by turning first to one of Russ's earlier and more highly acclaimed works *The Adventures of Alyx* and especially to the tale that closes that story sequence.

V

The final story in *The Adventures of Alyx* posits in fictional terms the politics of representation prevalent throughout Russ's work. In a story sequence that spans traditional boys' genres, from pirate adventures to wizards and warriors, "The Second Inquisition," is unique for its setting, an American suburb in the 1920s, and for its layering of realism and science fiction. The story begins by describing a suburban parlor. This deceptively realist introduction serves as a reminder of Russ's concern with genre throughout the collection. Here, the sudden inclusion of "our" world, of a recognizable version of consensus reality, highlights the conventional status of both realism and science fiction. At the same time, this choice signals that the terminal address of the book is the quotidian world of its readers. Alyx the adventurer does not appear in this final story. Instead, "The Second Inquisition" brings an Alyx-like character, the visitor, into the world of an average sixteen-year-old girl. In other words, the book ends by revealing the fantasy to have been an allegory for the life lived by the reader, for whom the girl serves as representative and into whose suburban parlor Russ's Alyx has come in the form of the book. In the person of the visitor and in her relationship with the teenaged narrator, the story thematizes the relationship of science fiction to consensus reality and, more broadly, of writing to reading.

The story narrates a teenage girl's fascination with the exotic visitor who has come to stay in her family's home. At first, the visitor's race, height, strength and shamelessness mark her exoticism. She befriends the wrong type of people, has little regard for pleasant lies and reads voraciously, including banned books. Indeed, it is over a proscribed romance novel that the teenage girl finds in the visitor an ally. A reader herself, the girl peers at the visitor from perspectives given to her by novels. Their

relationship begins by mimicking a bildungsroman, with the visitor cast in the role of the worldly, and secretly beloved, older man.[10] After a series of skirmishes with strangers the visitor apparently knows, this model acquires a science-fictional gloss. This, too, is introduced through a novel. The girl and the visitor both read H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, and the girl asks her in jest if she isn't really a Morlock, which the visitor concedes is true. After acknowledging that she comes from the future, through the Trans-Temporal Military Authority, the visitor explains that the girl is her ancestor, the founder of the Authority, and that she has come to talk with her, perhaps to rescue her, but that now she must leave.

More than a template for their relationship, then, the visitor literally embodies not only the kinds of stories the girl reads, but also the stories Russ writes. The tale, however, takes one more turn. In the very last movement, the visitor returns through a mirror in the girl's bedroom to have a final talk with her. After she leaves, the girl looks down at the outfit she has been wearing and recognizes it as a theater costume version of the visitor's interstellar gear, with pieces of her wardrobe reconditioned to serve as bodysuit, laser gun and cape. In other words, the story's final moment collapses its science fictional elements back into the realist frame, and makes the girl the source of the story's fantasy elements. In fact, one more step mediates the return to realism. In the midst of confessing that the figure in the mirror is herself, the girl splits into two: "I put one foot up in the air, as if on the threshold of the mirror, and a girl in ragged black stared back at me …. She said to me, 'You look idiotic'" (192). "The Second Inquisition" ends with the ambiguous line "no more stories" (192). While this line may refer to the visitor's departure in failure and

[10] For another take on this dynamic, see Russ's "The Mystery of the Young Gentleman."

the girl's solitude, its presence at the end of the collection seems to me to issue a double warning: On the one hand, it functions as an admonishment to stay on this side of the mirror where are found the conditions that make fantasy necessary at all. On the other hand, the resignation in this ending seems to me to demand anger at the failure of stories to provide role models for young girls. Thus, the ending urges the book's readers to risk looking idiotic, to don the visitor's clothes and to be as a stranger in their own living rooms.

The politics of representation that makes the reader and the story cohorts in rescue finds non-fictional expression in Russ's "Recent Feminist Utopias," which observes a new thematic element in women's science fiction and utopian writing of the 1970s: "The rescue of the female child" (79). Russ defines this as a two-stage operation: First, the rescue of the girl from the oppressive conditions of patriarchy, but second, and crucially, her guidance toward a fully autonomous and meaningful public life. This second stage underscores the importance of age to Russ's formulation. Rescue comes when the relative benignity of childhood play gives way to the serious labor of reproduction:

> Puberty is an awakening into sexual adulthood for both sexes. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, it is also the time when the prison bars of "femininity," enforced by law and custom, shut the girl in for good.
>
> ….
>
> This is one aspect of puberty missing in the above examples [of rescue]: the children therein are sexual beings, certainly, but the last thing (say the

> tales) that matter for the adolescent girl is that she be awakened by a kiss; what is crucial is that she be free. (80)[11]

Russ's critics have been even more ardently attached to the rescue theme. Kathleen L. Spencer's "Rescuing the Female Child: The Fictions of Joanna Russ" argues that this theme might best characterize Russ's own corpus. In revising and expanding this category, Spencer highlights the representational work Russ's narratives perform: "What Russ has done … is to create narratives ... which go beyond the moment of revelation into the imaging of freedom" (168). Spencer uses the example of female students' reactions to the stories they read in a class taught by Carolyn Heilburn to demonstrate the necessity of such new narrative performances. In calling on the example of women enrolled in a college course, Spencer makes clear that the rescue thematic applies to readers rather than to characters. By "imaging" freedom, these narratives act: they perform a rescue. Lurking here, then, is an aesthetic theory and a moral imperative, which Jean Cortiel describes succinctly as the choice to compose stories that "authorize or empower women as writers, narrators, readers and characters" (*Demand* 129). The verb "authorize" in this sentence underscores the identity Cortiel establishes between authored characters and authorized readers, both composed by the narrative. As in "The Second Inquisition," the story may come over for a visit.

Even with this explanation, we might wonder why the theme of rescue so insistently designates a child as the recipient of protection, rather than women more generally, all of whom are presumably "shut … in for good" (Russ "Recent" 80).

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[11] My use of the phrase "sexual" child closely matches Russ's use here. Rather than designating a sexually agential child, I refer to all children who must attend to the installation of proper sexual identity and its expression in gender norms.

Moreover, by what logic can girls be saved by virtue of narrative when for women it is already too late?[12] What relationship does this suggest adheres between children and storytelling? I would argue that the restriction of rescue to young girls takes part in the historical construction of the child as (a) being-in-danger. This danger has been most often understood as the danger of sexual knowledge. James R. Kincaid locates the cut that separates children from adults this way: "The child is that species which is free of sexual feeling or response; the adult is that species which has crossed over into sexuality" (*Child-Loving* 7). Construed as empty of sexuality and ignorant of sexual secrets, though destined to be filled up with and initiated into both, the child must properly negotiate the entrance into sexuality. The child inaugurates a process, a kind of adventure story, for which adulthood is both terminal exit and impossible vanishing point. Bound to the future, the child anticipates the injuries that will befall her own adult self. Danger, as Leo Bersani writes, "becomes intelligible as the sickness of uncompleted narratives"

[12] Russ's later novel *The Two of Them* addresses this question. Although I cannot indulge in a full reading of this novel here, suffice it to say that the novel's hero, Irene Waskiewicz, another Trans-Temporal agent, wants to rescue twelve-year-old Zubeydeh and her mother Zumurrud from the patriarchal culture of Ka'abah. Her failure to rescue the older woman ultimately shows Irene the limitations of her "enlightened" relationship with her lover and partner, Ernst, who will not let her take the older woman. This suggests that the focus on younger woman results from the continued reluctance of patriarchal culture to value older women. The dynamic here, though, is more complex than it first appears. Zumurrud doesn't want to leave. In her desire to kidnap Zumurrud, Irene forgets about Dunya, Zumurrud's sister, whom the family keeps locked in a small room inside the family compound and whom the novel explicitly links to the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." All three women suffer, but Irene cannot save them all even if she could literally take them all off the planet. Instead, she realizes that all four of them need radical structural change rather than any straightforward rescue. In effect, she realizes that there is no outside, no utopia, no place to which she can take them. On the other hand, Russ's authorial intrusion in the novel – she steps in to the text in order to fictionalize a boy child whom Zubeydeh had insisted they rescue – reasserts the priority of *women* over structural roles. The novel is apposite in many ways to Russ' thinking about rescue.

(*Freudian* 63), or, we might add, of other forms of wayward storytelling, uncompleted or improperly prolonged.

In the rescue theme, the (female) child's vulnerability to sexual danger warrants feminist intervention.[13] Far from radical, this conjunction of narrative pedagogy, sexualized danger to the child and political investment in future social organization has traditionally made the child the site of public anxiety and juridical control. Edelman has persuasively argued that the child-figure performs as the primary disciplinary technology of heteronormativity. While Russ cites patriarchal oppression in its most extreme forms—"imprisonment, madness, rape and beatings, or being chained for life" ("Recent" 83)—both sides of this encounter might very well espouse protectionist motives. Clearly, establishing proper binary value systems composes a large part of the politics of rescue narratives. But in this tug of war for the child, the fact of danger in some form, rather than receiving scrutiny, acts as the ballast around which binary terms might be established.

In this context, the literal crossing-over of the rescuing heroine into the world of the child appears as a rescue into proper narrativity, one so important it must be modeled and overseen. The occasion for this importance has to do with the mirroring between the children situated at the thresholds of textual narrative and social narrative, mimicking each other as the teenage girl mimics the visitor. The child inside the narrative figures the child outside of the narrative; the "real" child settling into the book while sitting in her parent's parlor. But because the text already projects and incorporates that external child,

[13] This connection might also illuminate the strange scene in *The Two of Them* in which Zubeydeh sexually abuses her younger male ward. As popular psychology has it, having been abused, she became an abuser. The tight coupling between abuse and renewed danger goes a long way to explaining the "child pedophile."

she stands in synecdochic relation to all potential child-readers. Both children receive instruction: the internal child through the auspices of the older woman, and the external child through the model of the story. Lefanu describes this dynamic in Russ's writing as "author, text and reader mov[ing] around the paradigm of mother and child in a complex and at times contradictory ways" ("Reader" 178). Lefanu's triadic "author, text and reader" succumbs to reduction as "mother and child," implying, as I am arguing, that a second child haunts this pedagogic scene. Or, rather, an infinite chain of children taking up the place of the reader, who functions as a metonym of all future social organization. And as this dyad also makes clear, the child's status as reproductive issue begins a reversible, metonymic chain that makes the child-figure stand in for the future and its proper production. Thus, worries over the child express anxiety about or management of that future. Even if the influence exerted over the child exemplifies the specter of "bad influence," the game remains the same: figuring the child as "nothing more than what it is constructed to be, nothing in itself at all" (Kincaid 90). While far subtler than her conservative counterparts, the pedagogic impulse of Russ's rescue thematic redeems the future by instructing its representatives. [14]

That words do things in the world is a familiar social constructionist and literary critical contention. These analytic modes, however, assume deep chasms within signification and complex iterations distorting the homology between signification and enactment, iterations that vibrate with historical contingency, polyvalency and intersecting forces. At the same time, the economy of correspondence that Spencer and Cortiel find in Russ's writing incorporates mediation in order to engender it and render it

[14] Here I am thinking of the "rescue thematic" in works like Tipper Gore's *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* and Christine Hoff Summer's *The War Against Boys.*

singular. Just as the rescuer in Russ's stories sweeps into a girl-child's life from the outside and remake her, so the story itself, figured as a powerful older woman, will rescue the girl-reader by opening new ingresses and egresses for flows of desire and imagination, allowing her to become the rescuer and the teller of tales that will someday rescue more girl-readers. Or, in other words, they are performative locutions, instituting and constituting a new subjectivity in and through the act of announcing that subject.

Of course, the stories are not women and the readers are likely not children, girl-children or otherwise. In the figural logic that makes children representative, however, a simple slide across metonymic registers engenders the story as a speaker addressing the child who lurks inside the adult reader, the self trapped behind the prison bars of femininity, the woman reader's past returned as potential future through the auspices of the appropriately named *trans-temporal* authority. Gathered all together – the fictional child, the pedagogic older women, the didactic story, the actual woman reader, her spectral inner child, the inner child's figuration of a reborn future likewise figured as child -- this interpretive parable forms what Jacques Derrida, in his critique of J-L Austin, calls a "unity": "This conscious presence of the speakers or receivers who participate in the effecting of a performative, their conscious and intentional presence in the totality of the operation, implies teleologically that *no remainder* escapes the present totalization" (emphasis his, "Signature" 125).[15] As in Austin's most famous example of the felicitous performative, the marriage act, the vitality of the word-story-older woman transforms the

[15] Russ famously denounced "patriarchal theory" in her "Letter to Susan Koppleman" (1995). Although some of her hostility seems symptomatic of a particular time and place, the letter issues a necessary challenge to the deification of a small lineage of male philosophers. In this case, I think that although Russ's and Derrida's texts engage different conversations, they both aim to counter what Russ calls "the enormous social forces" ("Letter" 173) that keep intact the relationship between presence and salvation.

strangely passive receiver-reader-girl child, in a closed circle with no remainder and no mistakes. Yet, unlike the marriage example, in which the official and the participants maintain different functions throughout the transformation, here the reader becomes the storyteller in a closed loop.

If the content of the narrative acts mimetically in the world in a strict one-to-one economy, then the story's effects must be carefully calibrated. It is therefore all the more shocking to find, in a novel written before the publication of "Recent Female Utopias" and after *The Adventures of Alyx*, a story that culminates in the death of the rescuer and the murder of the female child. What are we to make of the killing of the female child in *We Who Are About To…*, an element I've conspicuously withheld until this point in our analysis? How are we to understand Russ's materializing words when they are homicidal and suicidal? How are we to understand a novel that self-consciously materializes death? Or, as Judith Butler asks of the Austinian performative, "what would it mean for a thing to be 'done by' a word or, for that matter, for a thing to be 'done in by' a word? When and where, in such a case, would such a thing become disentangled from the word by which it is done or done in?" ("Butler" 198). In particular, how are we to understand this materializing word when it represents and comes to bear on the child, in whose name the harming word has been relentlessly interrogated? Although Russ's work images the child's redemption through the auspices of the wise, older woman, their bond might easily be construed as corrupting and endangering in its engendering, even apart from the ultimate panic-inducing tableau of the unruly woman turned child-murderer we have seen in the narrator.

"The Second Inquisition" provides a way through this dilemma. By layering science fictional devices over the realist setting, it performs a kind of generic slippage never fully resolved at the level of plot because this slippage concerns impossible knowledge. The visitor comes from another time in both the realist and the science-fictional frames. As an adult uninterested in children's innocence, she passes to the girl untimely knowledge in the form of the banned romance novel, unexplained jokes, and disdain for parental authority. In a reenactment of the Freudian primal scene, the girl spies through the bushes as the visitor and her lover have sex on a backyard swing. The science-fictional elements, however, impose an interpretative dilemma for this traditional bildungsroman topos. As a time-traveler, the visitor knows that the Good War will follow the Great War, that flapper styles will give way to curvier silhouettes, that aluminum pans and microwave ovens will replace iron pots. If the visitor is the girl's mirrored self, then the girl must already know all of this, which she can't know and still be the girl. Finally, then, the story's knowledge structure reverses the play of real and imagined. The girl and her suburb acquire the two-dimensionality of a studio set, the visitor retreats behind the mirror, leaving the vitality to the story and its telling. Far from an engendering word, this final story disentangles textuality from any of its representational truth-claims.

The inquisition of the title, with its reference to the unreliable oaths of heretics who pose as believers, gives weight to this interpretation. Yet the story can be and has been read as an allegory of "self-rescue" ("Rescue" 173) in Spencer's phrase, the ultimate example of the closed loop of the engendering word. If this story nestles both possible interpretations, then perhaps the violence of *We Who Are About To…* can be read as a provocation, a kind of interpretive violence aimed at rending open the closed circle of

rescuer and rescued to allow for more dispersed transmissions, less calculable effects and a less strident aesthetic morality. The novel is, after all, about the impossibility of rescue.

VI

Before her murders, before her suicide, when the narrator still at least pretends willingness to get along, she has an exchange with Lori, the only child in the novel, which provides an opportunity for the sort of future-oriented, engendering word we've seen in "The Second Inquisition." Like the narrator, a musicologist by profession, Lori wants to be a musician when she grows up. This link between them forms the ground on which the narrator might serve as a model for Lori's future self. The narrator asks to read Lori's palms, though she tells the reader in an aside that she fabricates the whole thing. Ostensibly derived from some mysterious pattern legible on the skin, palm reading supplies a cover for pedagogic instruction. In many ways, the narrator's reading contains all the central elements of the rescue thematic. She tells Lori that she will have a long life, attain much worldly success, riches and fame, that she will pursue her dreams, find love but never marry, and most importantly, that they will be saved. This story encapsulates what the novel denies to its readers: a happy ending, certainly, a sympathetic hero as well, but more importantly what I am calling narrative reproductions, or the terminus of the story in the reader's identification.

"Science fiction," writes Lefanu, "enjoys remarkable freedom from rigid rules about what constitutes a novel" ("Reader" 174).[16] While certainly true, most science

[16] In an insightful recent essay, Tess Williams regards the novel as an example of Bakhtinian satire. While I share many of Williams' critical attitudes, including most importantly her identification of Lori as "a particular site of anti-utopian satire" (215), my reading favors a narrower rubric than "carnival" allows. Rather than reading the novel as "acting to destabilize much of late twentieth-century mainstream Western culture" (210),

fiction conforms to the narrative stipulation that the length of the novel and its dramatic action equal each other. Of the many startling departures not only from novelistic conventions generally, but from her own established thematics specifically, the most striking in *We Who Are About To…* is its violation of the law of dramatic action. Her murders are shocking enough, but the real violence here comes not in the content but in the structure. As we've already had occasion to note, the novel doesn't end with her murders, even though the only actions possibly remaining to the novel would be rescue (an alternative ending the narrator relates as a grimly ironic joke) or her promised suicide. By killing the other characters, the narrator kills off both the future of the colony and the future of the novel. Nothing else can happen, and indeed nothing else does happen. The novel's structure does not so much refuse climax as it does prolong the consequences of that climax. It moves through and beyond what Roland Barthes calls "the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense" (*Pleasure* 10), tapering off into sterility and death. If, as I am arguing, Lori's death must be interpreted within the conventions it violates, then the killing of the narrative's future seems a direct assault on the pedagogic text and an invitation to non-reproductive textual perversions.

Indeed, the novel might have taken a very different turn. One could imagine a third Whileaway, the utopian gender-separatist future of "When it Changed" and *The Female Man*, rising on top of the destruction of the colony's burgeoning patriarchal civilization, just the narrator and twelve-year old Lori. Of course, such a scenario threatens to turn back into the futureless sterility of the narrator's long suicide in the

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I focus on its conversation with feminist goals and tactics. I hope that my work, by so locating the novel, has helped to elucidate *why* Russ might want to undermine the "rescued female child" (215) theme.

novel's conclusion without the introduction of some of the parthenogenetic magic that makes Whileaway a place readers want to return to. Even in a lesbian commune, the only future is in reproduction; which makes reproduction and narrative as structurally akin as childhood and narrative. And so Russ has no compassion for her readers, just as her narrator has no compassion for Lori. Instead, she shoots her in the back of the head. By breaking this narrative covenant, compassion's concern, to borrow a phrase from Edelman, with the "communal relations, collective identities, the very realm of the social itself" (*No Future* 68) is shown to hinge on the child who is both hope and issue of those relations. While Lefanu and Cortiel both praise Russ for her embrace of fragmentary, non-linear prose and for her hailing of the reader into complicated relationships with fragmenting narrators, neither deals directly with this profound murder of the reader's expectation that rescue will first of all mean compassion for the child.

Given all this, it seems less than coincidental that Lori's murder comes last, for she serves as a vehicle, as her name, an aural analog for the British "lorry," echoes. She maintains the social structure even as she is posted as its outer limits by serving as its ride into the future. In the novel's first phase, Lori's age and virginity keep her from the list of reproductive women assigned to "donate their genetic material" (57). Despite this apparent compassion for the tenderness of her youth, the whole scheme devolves on Lori's capacity to breed farther into the future than any of her substantially older companions. As a child, Lori need not contribute to the group's building effort. Despite the limitations of their situation, they accommodate her physical fragility whenever possible. Indeed, their sententious displays of concern for her hardly mortal allergic reaction to their fire - forcing everyone to "memorize the kind of tree whose burning had

made Lori sick" while her father monitors them, repeating "This is very important" (37) – only heightens the general infantilization that quickly enshrouds all of the women. Their protectionist rhetoric, as the narrator points out, has little do with any actual danger, foremost amongst these the danger of childbirth, but instead works to establish what Lauren Berlant calls "dead citizenship": "Identities not live, or in play, but dead, frozen, fixed, or at rest" ("Live Sex" 61), surrounded by the disciplinary technologies of protection. As in Russ's more typical rescue thematic, the oppression from which Lori must be saved claims to have her protection at heart.

In one reading of her choice to murder Lori, the narrator might be understood as releasing Lori from the confines of this death-in-life. This explanation, however, does not account for the oddly abstracting denomination of Lori as "a Lori" (Russ, *We* 95), which implies that she kills her not as an individual, but as a type. In fact, the past given to Lori in the novel troubles the question of personhood. As her mother explains, she was adopted as an infant and chosen because "she needed money like mine" (92). Only barely embodied, Lori underwent seven years of surgical interventions: "They said the only thing that really worked were her central nervous system and her skeletal muscles" (92). Pastiched together from borrowed parts, not even her mind was her own. While her body was assembled, her mind was "on P.D. [psychic displacement] so she wouldn't have to be there while they were doing it to her" (92). The sexual overtones of this phrasing mingle with the literalization of the constructed body of the child to produce a kind of hyper-invested blankness in which the content of the child equals the expertise of

technicians, the sentimental regard of parents, and the soft-focus idealization of the never-never land of childhood fantasy. Lori the vehicle never really lives at all.[17]

Rehearsing Lori's murder in her mind, the narrator once again abstracts her into a type, one of an army of "little twelve-year-old girls walking about with billons of dollars of improvements inside them. Like dolls with tape decks in a slot in the back" (132). The vaguely cyborgian evocation of the first line finds equivocal extension in the second. In fact, they have almost no logical relationship. Nothing about a kidney replacement indicates the automaton repetition of scripted loops that the narrator's image conjures. But Lori's speech does. Almost the first thing the narrator reports her doing is lecturing - the narrator terms it a "disquistion" (17) – on the physical reproducibility of sound, a topic she learned about in school, though whether she attended this school in her body or as a part of her psychic displacement goes unnoted. The latter possibility, however, merely exaggerates the mechanical repetition of schooling. In either case, Lori plugs into prerecorded information and then plays it back. In fact, the only tape deck in the novel is the one the narrator speaks into. This strong association of Lori with the narrator's means of transmission figures Lori as a kind of repeating machine through which narratives can be perfectly stored and reproduced. If Lori engines the future, she does so as a narrative vehicle freighting the present.

Why does the narrator kill Lori when she might have redeemed her murders by justifying them as for Lori, in Lori's name, as salvation from a future that would have

[17] Something uncomfortable lurks in this too-easy critical killing off of Lori. In fact, Lori's vitality will not be subdued. Even in the moments before her death, she camps, sulks and arrogantly demands attention. The narrator's description - "I shot her in the back of the head. Did it with the gas gun, shrugging it from my sleeve, practically touching her hair" (95) - makes the act of shooting a species of caress.

turned them both into breed animals without their consent? She doesn't kill Lori. She kills the means by which she might have turned her unsalvageable life into a memento mori, an error-free transcription. And with her, the narrator kills the possibility of instruction which all of her metaphors collude to expose as the very basis of our figurations of the child.

VII

Lori's disquisition on sound is the third such discussion to arise in the novel's opening pages. Not just sound but questions of material transmissions in many forms surround the novel. Searching for comparisons to explain the plot of Russ's *We Who Are About To…*, critics have continually reverted to television show titles. Spencer calls the novel "a grotesque parody of the Swiss Family Robinson" ("Rescuing" 175), a television version of which was aired in the same year as the book's release. Landon describes the eight survivors of the spaceship crash as "a somewhat curdled version of the characters in *Gilligan's Island*" ("Eve" 65). Tess Williams points to *Lost in Space*, another popular `60s television show. The novel warrants these allusions through its own references to popular culture. Soon after the group leaves the safety of the passenger compartment for the alien planet on which they've landed, the narrator quips that their medicine box contains "Benzedrine and bobby-pins!" (Russ, *We* 21), a joke the others fail to find funny because it's "too vulgar, base and popular" (21) for them to have ever heard it. Much later in the novel, after she has killed everyone else, the narrator compares herself to a character on a situation comedy: "Elaine on Desert Island – of which there are none on Earth that do not contain resort hotels – her 3-D viewer, her burning-glass, her resourcefulness, ages eight to twelve" (105). The interjected comment about resort hotels

recalls young Lori's retort when the narrator complains that their planet resembles the Australian outback and might be just as deadly: "She'd been there, in a special hotel, and it was very, very nice" (37), yet again introducing questions of mediation and mediatization. The novel's most noted intertext is Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover Landfall*, an engagement that rightly privileges both works' interest in science-fictional colonization narratives and their consequences for women's reproductive autonomy. While an important aspect of this novel, the narrator's murders effectively close that question less than half of the way through the plot. Taking the novel as a whole, the question of procreation within the community merges with and is overshadowed by the novel's structural rejection of reproduction as a narrative demand and its more subtle interest in transmission and dissemination.

The novel signs its own interest in television through the use of the typical situation comedy conceit of ill-matched strangers and through the narrator's repeated comparison of their camp to a "stage-set" (26).[18] More importantly, the novel's explanation of its material composition brings questions of transmission to the fore. The pocket voice recorder literally requires specific technologies for retrieval and replay, a problem confronted twice in the novel's opening sequences. In the first instance, Cassie finds that her tape deck is out of batteries. Annoyed, she asks if there is any way to recharge the batteries, to which the narrator responds: "There's nothing we can do – our gadgets are all sealed and shielded. It's a different kind of energy; we can't transform the

[18] This could also reference theater performances. It is compelling to consider *We* as a kind of mixed-media performance. We might see the narrative contained on the pocket voice recorder, which is like television broadcast in its reproducibility, as generated through the performative equivalent of a play performed for an audience of eight. My thanks to Carrie Hintz for this insight.

one to the other" (17). Moments later, Alan-Bobby asks if the narrator has any of her music with her. "Tapes," she says, "Want to use them for ribbons? I have the amplifier and the recorder – see? they fit in my hand – but the speakers are too big" (17). The reason that they attempt to colonize the planet at all hinges on the problem of temporally delayed reception. Their laser distress signal, moving only at the speed of light, might reward them with a rescue mission "in as little as a couple of centuries, a century, eighty years even. Even little Lori will be dead" (20). A problem of spacing, then, common to all writing, which is ruptured, as Derrida writes, by the "spacing which constitutes the written sign: the spacing which separates it from other elements of the internal contextual chain … but also from all other forms of a present referent" ("Signature" 118).

At the same time that the problem of transmission bodes poorly for rescue, it lends a strange persistence to their lives and deaths whose "light … may not reach you for a thousand million years" (Russ, *We* 8). Black-boxed, with no framing narration to explain how we are reading this story whose future-technology tape-recorder becomes increasingly more difficult to find in our present, the story situates itself in the impossible present of television repeats. Even more than written narrative, television relies on serial reproducibility, recyclings of identical narrative arcs whose closure always leaves open the possibility of doing it all again. And like television, the illusion of narrative convention and the physiology of sound and vision give words to individual mouths rather than speakers from which they issue, in this case only and always the narrator, no matter whose indirect discourse she performs. Yet, the content of a television narrative sits uneasily next to the physics of its materiality. Each broadcast, in its repeatability,

eludes direct address and perfect contextualization, spinning out, as the narrator says of her lost music, "into the ionosphere" (17).

"Who are you?" the narrator asks of her reader several times through her narration, playfully assigning alien biology, flippers, gills, and differently constructed voice boxes to her voice's receiver. "Writing orphaned" ("Signature" 118) as Derrida describes all writing, finding its condition of possibility in "being severed from its referent or signified" (120) as well as from "the self-presence of a total context" (128), does not condemn to failure the investment in writing as a politically effective force. It just demands a more generous interval, a more complex field, and more room for the productivity of error and misprision. While Lori is made into the perfect machine for reproduction, the narrative insistently highlights the problem of transmission.

Such, perhaps, is the lesson of two memories the narrator relates to voice recorder as she starves to death in her cave. Though she is haunted by the ghosts of her immediate past, her direct addresses to the reader primarily relate her experiences as a radical political activist. As a member of the Populars, a movement grounded in communist ethics, she is invited to lecture. Onstage preceding one of these events, she suddenly finds herself the target of the crowd's hostility: "Something I can only describe as a growing volume in the infra-bass as if the floor were preparing to rise and the walls come tumbling down, an ominous, slowly-rising roar" (Russ *We* 116). The "cutting edge of change" (119) occurs here not as a surgical incision separating the longed-for future from its fully-formed arrival, but as movement producing sound and sound amplifying movement, the rumble of voices and bodies that portends violence less against her than

against the edifice they all occupy. Her words do act, even before she can speak them, but with unpredictable and areferential results.

The narrator relates another story about her revolutionary past that turns on the question of dissemination. When still a Popular, she designed a graffito too unwieldy to become a slogan: “Money doesn’t matter when / Control is somewhere else” (123). She thinks it forgotten until years later she finds it tagged on the wall of a New Zealand subway station, continents away. Each of these stories stages the indeterminacy of direct control over dissemination as opposed to delayed reception, and the tendency of text to find its own addressee.

All this discussion of sound’s capture and the unlikely paths of orphaned graffiti prefigure the ultimate irony of the book: She locks it. “By writ and tort, by hullabaloo and brouhaha, I declare this tapedeck locked to all voiceprints but mine, locked *re* playback, locked *re* print out, and may God have mercy on your soul” (77). We might suppose that the fact of the text means that she did not commit suicide, that her grim joke came true and she was rescued somewhere outside the frame of the diegesis. Or we might conjecture that some alien civilization in the far future found her tape deck, unsealed and transcribed it, just as her asides to her beflippered readers foretell. But I find these to be dubious attempts to resuscitate exactly the kind of exact reproduction that Lori embodies. I’d rather think the whole thing a sham and the locked voice recorder a little, winking punctum deflating any sense of narrative origin, continuity and truth. By so emphatically denying the reader the ability to identify with the text, the locked tape deck blasts open the closed loop composed of the embodied story and the rescued reader, leaving only

remainders without gravity floating away from each other in the ether and to be disseminated across time – trans-temporal, indeed.

VIII

Framed by the mystically transformative force of the rescue thematic's performative locutions, *We Who Are About To…* looks less like a deconstruction than like a wholesale massacre of all those metonymic children and mothers that congregate around Russ's work and its critical reception. The second half of the novel, however, which describes her long starvation period, does provide a future. During this long starvation period, the planet suddenly returns and with it an alternative to the sacralized future and the sacrificial present. Without the symbolic overlay the group insisted upon, and without anyone to convince of the possible harm awaiting them, with indeed the harm already accomplished, the ecology emerges as alien: neither threatening nor comforting, just alien. Only in the very last pages of the novel, and coming as if a sign of her readiness for death, does she see the planet as utterly indifferent to her. First, she experiences the landscape as a symphony, specifically as Handel's *Messiah* bellowing "Forever and ever!" but soon sees her own mistake:

> And they played and they sang and I wept, everything I ever knew, for Baroque music is keyed into Isaac Newton's kind of time; it's the energy of that new explosion of philosophic time: perspective, mathematics, instant velocity, the great clock, the great wheel, the Great Godly Grid.
>
> ….
>
> Over here the Phoenix Reaction and God as Engineer. Over here entropy, suffering, death. And then the real Einstein, too complicated for me

> although I know what I am supposed to like, Stravinsky and after; it makes my head ache, referring to things in all dimensions and sometimes backwards. And then it turns primitive, this is a bloody great dynamo and this a laboring flute. (164)

In this final meditation, the struggle over which narrative will structure the colonists' lives on the planet appears as two versions of "the Great Godly Grid" of Newtonian physics and purposeful teleology forever and ever under the reign of reason. Beneath the comforting regularity of the "great clock," however, lurks the apprehension of mechanical failure and encroaching decay. As a story about the future, the law of entropy offers the timeless conservation of energy only by projecting an increasingly lifeless and uninhabitable world. As I have been arguing, conserving future life by constraining its form is an entropic strategy requiring deathly immobility. By moving away from replicative Newtonian time to "the real Einstein," the narrator gives up controllable predictability, and its attendant anxieties, for the complexity of a future that moves in its own course, offering some plenitude and some harm, but always resisting our projections and predictions, always an epistemological void that no fence can contain nor narrative subdue. It is here that we can discern a future without harm, for this is an understanding of the future robust enough to recognize the complex historical, ecological and textual dynamics swerving all human intention.

IX

Writing a decade after the publication of this novel about the divisive "sex wars" of second wave feminism,[19] Russ articulates a feminist methodology divorced from moral law:

> The feminism I know began as politics, not rules for living. To call X a feminist issue did not then mean that there was a good way to do X and a bad way, and that we were trying to replace the bad way with the good way. X was a feminist issue because it was the locus of various social pressures (which made it visible) and those social pressures were what feminism was all about. (*Magic* 77)

In this statement, Russ defines "politics" not as a means of assuring the ascendancy of certain practices over others but as a method of releasing the energy caught up in an intensive field so that it can go on to engender new forms. The future, more particularly the continuation of the human into the future, is one of these loci of social pressure so intensive that it determines the limits of action, grounds discourse, and draws all fantasies into its orbit's gravity. To practice feminism, in the sense Russ describes, is to recognize the more than human, more than reproductive forces shaping the future. I began by arguing that compulsory heterosexuality relies on our fidelity to the future and casts procreation as the only true guarantee of that future. By ending with this quotation, I'd like to reassert that discourse, as one of the forces shaping the future and as the wellspring of reproductive futurism, never fully remains under our control. We can only push toward the new.

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[19] For an excellent overview of these debates, see Echols.

Chapter III

Redemptive Catastrophes and Metaphysical Materialisms

Apokalupto, I disclose, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal the thing that can be a part of the body, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the sex or whatever might be hidden, a secret, the thing to be dissimulated, a thing that is neither shown nor said, signified perhaps but that cannot or *must* not first be delivered up to self-evidence …. And what seems the most remarkable in all the biblical examples I was able to find and must forgo exposing here is that the gesture of denuding or of affording sight - the *apocalyptic* movement – is more serious here, sometimes more culpable and more dangerous than what follows and what it can give rise to.

- Jacques Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," 121.

Dare we see, in the end that's forbidden to be one, this endless line of children – a genetic line, a narrative line, stretched out to the crack of doom – as itself the nightmare of history from which we're helpless to awake?

- Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* 149.

He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.

- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road,* 5.

> The myth of the cave, for example, or as an example, is a good place to start.
>
> - Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 243.

I

The Road begins twice. The first beginning relates a familiar post-apocalyptic scene. It is early morning and we are in the woods. A man awakens, checks on a sleeping child and looks around himself at the featureless, ruined world. In a sort of descriptive chiasmus, the second beginning repeats the details we've already seen, but with slight alterations. The first beginning is gray and fireless, the second black and fire-lit; the first, silent and empty, the second silent and full; in the first, there is nothing to discover; in the second, each step reveals another unexpected detail; the first describes an actual place, the novel's setting, while the second recounts a dream-place; in the plot, the Man leads his son, the Boy, on a journey across a post-apocalyptic U.S., while in the dream, the Man follows the Boy. The prominence of this dream at the opening of the novel, the canted repetition of details from the setting, and the presence of firebrands, which serve as the central metaphor for civility throughout the novel, indicate that the dream expresses something importantly inexpressible as such within the frame of the diegesis proper. For this reason, it bears close scrutiny.

In the dream, the child leads the man into an earthen cave, which the narrator compares to "the inward parts of some granitic beast" (McCarthy 3). Hand-in-hand "like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost" (3), the two explore what their light allows them to see. They discover a "black and ancient" (3) lake, and on the shore of the lake, a

beast. It is blind, and its eyes appear as “dead white” as “the eggs of spiders” (3-4). Like a set of nesting dolls, the beast-like cave has in its belly another beast, itself comparable to a nest of beasts, from whose “inward parts” (3) will come yet more beasts. Though this beast crouches to drink at the lake like a bear or a dog, it has no hair. Instead, it is “pale and naked and translucent” (4), its bones, bowels, heart and brain visible through its skin. Exposed, atavistic, quadrupedal, mutated, but clearly human, this beast inside the beast retreats from the light they carry and leaves them alone.

This second beginning summarizes in condensed form McCarthy’s novel’s mutation of the post-apocalyptic. Unlike the post-apocalypse whose rupturing event stages a new beginning for society, McCarthy’s novel keeps looking for a narrative line, a true beginning capable of compelling a telos, and keeps finding itself in the middle, in an interminable apocalyptic nowhere. The dream of the cave inscribes the desire to find a new origin point but also the apprehension that they may already belong to it. As Irigaray puts it in the passage I have taken as the final epigraph to this chapter, the cave is a good place to start. She continues: “Read it this time as a metaphor of the inner space, of the den, the womb or *hystera*, sometimes of the Earth” (243). As a figure for the womb, the cave stands in for the origin and makes their wanderings into an exploration, a story whose ending will recode the territory they move across as conquered, human space. It is no accident that the origin, implicitly female, also serves as an image of the Earth whose bounty nourishes only after it is pacified through human – read male – cultivation. In the novel’s setting, too, the sterility of the land serves as a metonymy for the absent disaster. The dream doesn’t include the beast’s sex, but the weave of its figures, its arrangement of positions and gazes, makes clear what Irigaray would call its *scenography*. She writes:

> If there is no more "earth" to press down / repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one's own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the ex-sistence of the "subject"? If the earth turned and more especially turned upon herself, the erection of the subject might thereby be disconcerted and risk losing its elevation and penetration. For what would there be to rise up from and exercise his power over? And in? (*Speculum* 133)

All the beasts in the dream of the cave are female: the naked Beast at the lake whose mutated body promises weird progeny; the womb- and earth-like cave that swallows them up, and, most importantly, what all of these figures figure: the post-apocalyptic Earth through which they travel in their waking lives. If this dream of the origin frightens, the source of that fright comes from the continued survival of life outside of reproduction. Cast into the light by the Boy's brand, the Beast and the autochthonic Earth she figures illumine the impropriety of the properly parthenogenetic couple, their need for a spurned third term to guarantee progeniture and the sacred trick that conjures that term away again.

As a modern rewriting of the Biblical Apocalypse of John, it should come as no surprise that McCarthy's novel thematizes male relations against an uncannily inward turned Earth. In "Representing Apocalypse: Sexual Politics and the Violence of Revelation," Mary Wilson Carpenter demonstrates how central apocalypse narratives have been to the continued self-evidence of the gendered binaries Irigaray limns in the passage above. Carpenter worries about the tendency, shared across the popular and scholarly reception of apocalypse narratives, to erase the violence of the apocalypse in

favor of a sentimentalized valorization of patrimony. She notes with some astonishment the willingness of literary scholars to see the apocalypse as an "apocalypse of the mind," in Northrop Frye's memorable phrase (qtd. in Carpenter 120). We can see a similar process of mystification at work in Oprah Winfrey's characterization of *The Road*. During her televised interview with McCarthy, she describes the novel as, on the one hand, an "ominous" and "frightening" depiction of our near future, and, on the other, a touchingly poignant "love story to [his] son" ("Interview"). Neither Winfrey nor McCarthy comments on the disjunction between these two descriptions. We might conjecture, however, that for them and their projected audience the love story excuses, indeed vitiates, the horror of the setting.

Confronting receptions like these, Carpenter poses Steven Goldsmith's question: "Under what extraordinary circumstances, then, might a reader come to see the apocalyptic text as the very antithesis of impending, violent change, indeed, even as a model of order, harmony, stability" (qtd in Carpenter, "Representing" 112). Carpenter points out that the politics of reading that structure this "disarming" (112) of the apocalypse manifest a willful blindness not only to the messy physical decimation central to the apocalypse narrative but also to the specificities of its arrangements of bodies and powers. She notes this disparity in order to argue that "what even recent twentieth-century 'representations of apocalypse' have consistently overlooked is that the violence of Revelation is *male* violence, and that it is violence *between men* and *to* women" (110). Citing the burning and cannibalization of the Great Whore of Babylon, the denunciation of the female prophet, Jezebel, and the expulsion of the woman clothed in the sun after she bears the male heir, Carpenter contends that Goldsmith's "extraordinary

circumstance" (112) lies within the logic of the apocalyptic narrative itself, which positions the feminine as the abject ground of redemption. She concludes that Revelation functions entirely to assure the triumph of sons over mothers and warns that even the most self-conscious attempts to unsettle the apocalyptic schema might fail to derail this project: "Gender hierarchy," she writes, "appears essential to 'apocalypse,' whatever it may be" (124).

Yet the novel's two beginnings give us reason to pause and look closely at what Carpenter calls the text's "historically specific organization of sexuality as power, discourse, bodies and affectivity" (110). Her methodology urges us to distrust conclusions – especially successful ones! – that make messy and difficult texts into ones we believe we already know. Here the novel's two beginnings suggest a bifurcation in the text that binds together the novel's twin figures of futurity, the mutational beast and the sacred child.

That this bifurcation creates a fold that binds rather than a split that divides can also be seen in the doubling of the narrative function. As in many of McCarthy's novels, the dialogue is not set off from the narrative by any grammatical marks. Except where the lines break for dialogue, the narrative voice seamlessly merges into and out of the consciousness of the Man, raising the possibility that the Man narrates the book despite the third person perspective. Yet these two voices dramatically differ in their depiction of the post-apocalyptic world. This distinction within indistinction puts into crisis the same opposition it compels. Though it is tempting to read the Man against the narrator, the Boy against the Beast and the novel against the apocalyptic tradition, those neat oppositions reveal themselves instead as a doubling and a haunting.

Carpenter's description of the figurative labor of women in the apocalypse does describe the mother in *The Road*. Yet, instead of merely serving as the abject ground of redemption, she self-consciously redeploys the Man's use of the apocalypse. Well before the novel opens, she chooses to commit suicide rather than face what she sees as their inevitable rape, murder and cannibalization. When the Man asks her to think of them as survivors, she retorts that they are not survivors, but rather "the walking dead in a horror film" (McCarthy, *Road* 55). Their competing figurations point to the generic nature of their argument; they can't agree on which type of story they have been thrust into and thus the ending that their two narrative choices would predict: death in hers; redemption and renewal in his. Her explanation to her husband is couched in explicitly apocalyptic terms:

> You say you cant [survive alone]? Then dont do it. That's all. Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. […] As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart. (56 – 57)

Framed by the apocalyptic tradition – one might imagine, by the Man's referencing of that tradition – as the savior's mother, her only option is to occupy the other position, as whore: "You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot" (57). The jockeying between them for the authority to name their circumstances and her sneering capitulation to his narrative framing ("you can think of me" [57]) implies that the presence of the apocalyptic tradition in the text comes from

the Man. However, in this the novel seems to collude. Her death, after all, means that the novel proceeds without any female characters until the return of a proper mother-figure in the conclusion, after the Man's death. That the narrative must dispense with the birth-mother points toward the process by which apocalyptic narratives locate a single, stigmatized woman to stand-in for all women, then abstract and reify the feminine from out of her death, and finally embody a now-purified feminine in a new mother-figure.

Yet neither can we say that the adherence to the structure set out by John's Revelation fully guides the novel's own logic, since it also thwarts the coherence of this argument by, for instance, making the son's birth coincide with the apocalyptic Event. As if the mother had born twins, the novel's single depiction of the Event and its only allusion to the Boy's birth happen in the same paragraph:

> The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. […] He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?
>
> I dont know.
>
> Why are you taking a bath?
>
> I'm not.
>
> (53)

The light and the concussions usher in the start of her contractions, though she is unaware that her water has broken. The novel allows the Man, not the woman, to fully apprehend the dual birth to which he will play nurse and guide: the redemptive male child and the

newly alien Earth. In one reading, then, only the Man gets full access to the meaning of the Event, while the women merely acts and reacts within it. In this reading, we might say that the proximity on the page and in the timing of the Event and the birth indicates the novel's endorsement of his role of savior. The Event, then, might be thought to have segregated good from evil, concentrating the former in the Boy and the latter in the cannibal hordes who dominate the U.S. But the same scene could also signal the critique of that idea in the co-constitution, literally the twinning, of violent purgation and redemptive purification. The folding together of the Event with the Boy's birth twines together the cave and the womb, making pregnancy into the only narrative figuration of a sterility-inducing catastrophe. The evidence for the former is identical to the evidence for the latter. Rather than opposed possibilities, these two interpretations double each other and rebound on each other as each other's constitutive conditions.

II

At every level in *The Road* one finds the fold that binds and doubles: the concussion-contraction of the Event; the internal-externality of the narrative voice; the cave-womb, and the haunting absent-presence of the pre-apocalyptic world and the newly alien Earth. It is against the intuition of the identity of these doubles, far more than in the struggle to survive, that the Man and Boy journey. They track across the Eastern United States less to find their own refuge than to recode the space as a part of a journey with a unified meaning. To this end, the Man salvages and uses the everyday technologies of domination, not least among them the eponymous road and the map they use to navigate it. These are technologies that represent space as if it were an unchanging unity rather than sharing a generative fold with its double: time.

A whole poetics attends these devices. For instance, toward the end of their journey, the Man unfolds the map he's been carrying and shows the boy:

> He sat looking at the map. The man watched him. He thought he knew what that was about. He'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world. (182)

Tracing distances vis-à-vis a locating finger is the quotidian pre-apocalyptic material-discursive technology of domination. The Man trusts in the road to obey the 20th century's compression of time into space and to act as a technology of transfer. In that equation, time on the road becomes space on a map whose divisions promise differences. As an artifact, the road provides a supplementary body – a prosthetic – for the epistemological order implied by the even ranks of phone numbers listed in the directory. Just as, indeed, the boy provides the supplemental-sacrificial body for a temporal order gone cross-eyed. Like the road, the Boy promises a horizon of difference that's really a restoration of ordered progression. Despite his incarnation of proper order, the boy, like the translucent beast, has always lived exposed and without community. In different ways, but for them both, the *polis*, the political community that binds time as space, has given way to a profound homelessness.

> He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the *absolute truth* of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running.

> The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. (italics mine, 130)

The novel offers as an alternative reading to the redemption the Man sees in his son what the narrator calls "the ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be …. hydroptic and coldly secular" (274). Such a reading poses an entropic end – the world's death – to the redemptive end the Man imagines for his son. But the above passage introduces a third term: the possibility that they have been abandoned in the middle, as they ever in truth were. Martin Heidegger calls this homelessness "the symptom of oblivion of Being. Because of it the truth of Being remains unthought" (*Basic* 242). The passage above reverses Heidegger's terms and announces homelessness as the revelation of Being. If the cave's roof is the sky and they are stuck on the ground without the elevation necessary to view their situation objectively and plan for the future, then the chronology of their travels will not describe a cartography of escape. In the crisis of the redemptive/entropic model, the revelation of being comes not from the ending of the world or from the nadir of their loss, whose depths mirror the height of the coming zenith, but from the world's unending middle. As an artifactual body like the map, the Boy promises escape; as progeny, however, he recalls the Beast. If the beast and the boy are bound to each other, rather than posed against each other, it is in the crisis of the middle that their kinship shines forth. By the same token, the crisis of the middle, always present, compels their polarization.

We might therefore extend Carpenter's conclusion to argue that the beloved son not only stands in the place of and covers over the violence enacted in his name but also that the son as beloved child poses as the primary problem the proper transmission of

patrimonial inheritance as futurity. McCarthy's novel not only features as its primary protagonist a father whose fierce commitment to his son's survival in the face of civilizational, agricultural and familial decay drives the plot, it also bears the name of his son on its dedication page.[1] This dedication binds the post-apocalyptic world of the novel to the world of its composition and makes the book itself an object of patrilineal transmission. The apparently unremarkable use of a foreclosed future as the setting for the story indicates that some threat troubles the drama of patrilineal transmission in both contexts.

The problem of proper reproduction, then, is located not only in the soil, but at the center of the novel and in the figure of the child. If apocalypse narratives have historically maintained the link between women, nature and origin on the one hand and men, civility and progress on the other, then we might construe the son-who-is-child-of-the-father as a mediating term between them. Still bearing the vestiges of the womb, the male child-figure bridges the father's civility to the mother's originary force and in so doing sacralizes the future as such. Thus the radical foreclosure of human futurity implied by the post-apocalyptic setting may be undone by the future contained within and purified by the sacred child. In this sense, purgation and purification act as the inaugural gestures in the drama of patriarchal transmission whose proper name is love:

> He'd stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there

[1] In the same interview, McCarthy tells Winfrey of his inspiration for the novel. He was in a secluded motel room while traveling with his son, who was nine years old at the time. From his window one night he saw fires burning on a nearby hill. The contrast with his sleeping son's face inspired him to write.

> in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle. (McCarthy, *Road* 273)

The dream of the cave, however, intimates a third "unimaginable future" (273) alongside the boy's glow and the Earth's waste. As metaphor for the post-apocalyptic Earth, the cave should be barren. Instead, they find it already inhabited. The life the torchlight illumines hints of more such alien lives. Framed as a part of the text's unconscious, the dream insinuates that the threat does not come from the collapse of the future, but from its uncanny duration beyond the end. Thus the double valence of the cave: It may serve as a fantasied origin point but this dream is a nightmare of enclosure and of forms of life that prosper without cultivation. If they are enclosed in many mouths, swallowed up and lost in their search for an exit, it is because there is no exit. The Earth has lost the grid-work that subtended narrative progression. Though the conceit of the novel hinges on the idea that the apocalyptic Event has rendered the soil no longer suitable for cultivation, the dream suggests that despite the language of devastation some life continues to thrive.

III

Reviews and readings of the novel tend to begin with a recitation of the death of nature. Thomas H. Schaub writes that McCarthy's syntax "holds out first the image of life and then its ashen reality" (156). William Kennedy begins his *New York Times Book Review* article by listing the signs of nature's death: "Fire and firestorms have consumed forests and cities, and from the fall of ashes and soot everything is gray, the river water black" ("Left" 1). These conditions have made it impossible to grow and preserve food, leading to the frantic search for increasingly rare canned, powdered, pickled or salted foodstuff. I will return at some length to the role of industrial products in the

postapocalypse, but for now I want to focus on the claim that the collapse of the agrarian infrastructure is synonymous with the death of nature. Tim Edwards, in a recent reading of the novel, characterizes the landscape as a "wasteland" that no longer offers "solace and comfort" but instead issues a "dire warning" ("End" 55). What is the content of this warning? My conjecture here, to telegraph a bit, is that the novel's warning does concern nature, but not its death. By comparing the narrator's description of the world after the Event with a memory from a time before the Event and both with this dream, I show that the content of that warning has little to do with any natural- or human-made disaster.

As in the dream, the narrator speaks the description, slipping into the Man's thoughts as the Man is falling to sleep, emerging into a middle voice whose source seems to be the novel itself and then returning at the last moment to a first-person voice unconnected to the third-person narration that begins the passage. In the moments preceding this strange reflection, the Man and the Boy have once again made camp. The Boy, who rarely speaks, asks the Man what would happen if he died. The Man answers that he "would want to die too" (McCarthy, *Road* 11). The Boy asks if that means that they will be together after death, an idea that the Man affirms. Nothing intercedes between the Boy's final "Okay" and this:

> He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone. (11)

At the very end of the novel, after the Man's death, a man and woman adopt the Boy. Using the same figure as the narrator employs here, the woman tells the Boy that he can talk to his father even though his father is dead because "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (286). Reunited with a mother, sheltered in her arms, inhaling and exhaling the breath of God shared by all men – justified again in a world made distinct from all the others by man's sovereign right of existence, bearing up under the fluxions of a crisis that will pass because men will breathe through all of time - this is not the world whose ontology the narrator describes in the dream and in the passage above. Like the cave, that world is dark, wet, enclosed in bedrock, cold and silent. The image of bedrock conveys the stripping away of topsoil, in this case of the human world built up from the Earth, to reveal the foundations. In this unveiling, the loss of the human world reveals the foundation as void. Without the ballast of human production, nothing remains shored up, everything moves. The foundation is the wind and its originary capacity to carry, what the novel calls "something nameless in the night, lode or matrix" (15). Beyond the unveiling, at the foundation, the novel asserts two opposite visions of ontology: on the one hand, that we are breath and on the other, that we are lost in the cave.

This fissure is not the product of the apocalypse. Compare McCarthy's narrator's description of the ontology of the post-apocalypse with this memory from before the Event of a trip the protagonist took as a young man with his uncle:

> The shore was lined with birch trees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees

> themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. His uncle turned the boat and shipped the oars and they drifted over the sandy shallows until the transom grated in the sand. A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water. Yellow leaves. (13)

Nothing in this passage's description of nature places it before the Event: the trees, like the trees they pass on the road, are compared to bone; the stumps are twisted; the fish are dead in the water. Yet, for the Man, "this was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (13). Like the Man's journey with the Boy, this is a story of the generational inheritance of knowledge gleaned from watching and imitating. As in his present, the Man is engaged in manipulating natural resources, in this case towing a stump to shore so they could chop it for firewood. I can point to little in this passage that testifies to the fullness of life it is supposed to represent, except for the promise of the "window-lights coming on along the shore" (13) and the woman who is sure to be in the house when they return. Perhaps, though, that is enough to cover over the fissure: the trail between the outside and the inside, their separation from each other and their contiguity to each other, and the accessibility of both to men.

In their travels on the road, the Man and the Boy often cross the threshold into private houses in search of food, but the Event has flattened their differences and made them uncanny and exposed. In their alienation from an *oikos*, a womb, a domestic[ated] interior, the Man and the Boy unveil its uncanny other: the *chora*. Whereas the house encloses space so that men may move through it, the chora takes up the duplicitous position as the constitutive outside. But the chora and oikos are not separate ideas except in the rending that accompanies the apocalypse. Just as the post-apocalyptic Earth loses

the grid-work that not only allowed us to locate ourselves in space but also to locate our surrounds as made in our image, and becomes instead the earthen cave of the novel's opening dream, so the difference between the oikos and the chora depends on the human relation to it rather than any immanent quality. The Earth, like the chora, is what it has always been.

A second dream testifies to the novel's apprehension of this identity of the chora and the oikos. In one of the very few images in the novel of a lushly growing Earth, the Man dreams that "his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell" (18). In the metaphoric economy of this dream, the fecundity of the Earth, those "green and leafy" (18) canopies, and the cultivation of a women's beauty in the service of her husband's appreciation, those "pipeclayed" (18) nipples, are identical; farming is fucking; the death of one requires the death of the other. But something cave-like, chora-like, lurks in this depiction of the pacified Earth as "pale bride" (18). The shell in her hair recalls the lake in the cave; her gauzily transparent dress the transparent skin of the beast; her white rib-bones its rounded and sepulchral interior. Like the separation of the oikos and the chora, the difference between the beast at the lake and the bride in the forest is a function of the dreamer.

The notion of the chora comes from Plato's *Timaeus,* in which the titular speaker narrates the production of the cosmos from its earliest beginnings to the advent of the human.[2] As John Sallis notes, despite Timaeus's explicit desire to recount the origins in a

[2] In *Raising,* Derrida remarks on the frequency with which "the Persian and Zoroastrian heritage up to the very numerous Jewish and Christian apocalypses … inscribe this or that text of Plato" (136).

properly ordered succession, so that his discussion matches the construction of the universe, he instead succumbs to the "disorder, the errancy" (*Chorology* 65) of human discourse, first by narrating the creation of the body of the universe before narrating what preceded it in creation, the soul, and then, most significantly, by breaking off his narrative completely and turning back to remember the chora, or what Timaeus calls "the errant cause, necessity" (Plato, *Timaeus* 47). Here are the opening lines:

> Now our foregoing discourse, save for a few matters, has set forth the works wrought by the craftsmanship of Reason; but we must now set beside them the things that come about of Necessity. For the generation of this universe was a missed result of the combination of Necessity and Reason. Reason overruled Necessity by persuading her to guide the greatest part of things that become toward what is best; in that way and on that principle this universe was fashioned…. If, then, we are really to tell how it came into being on this principle, we must bring in also the Errant Cause – in what manner its nature is to cause motion. (47)

In the first section of the discourse, Timaeus makes the foundational cut between "that which is always real and has no becoming and that which is always becoming and is never real" (16). The *prime mover*: that which in causing to move does not itself move. All creation fits the second criteria; its model and maker-mover, the first; what could be that does not fall under the jurisdiction of these two categories? Apparently, a whole new

beginning must be made for Necessity, the errant cause of motion,[3] as Sallis explains, and the two divided into three:

> If, nonetheless, one calls it a third kind, then the discourse will already have begun to get entangled to a degree that cannot but broach difficulty and expose the discourse to danger. It will already have begun to do something other than *just say* the third: for one will have to say also that it is a kind of kind beyond kind, a kind of kind outside of kind. (emphasis his, *Chorology* 99)

This third thing, allegedly outside of intelligible kinds, which threatens to ruin the whole ordered system of likenesses, creators and models, movers and moved things, must be convinced to lend its power of motion to Reason, to allow itself to be bound to "things that become toward what is best" (Plato, *Timaeus* 47).[4] This astonishing admission allows that there is a force in the world, though convinced to labor to produce the good, that is not of the same order as the rest and has no stake in its continuation. Bound, we might call necessity the oikos; released from its promise, chora. Indeed, it is directly after he recounts the binding of necessity that Timaeus first calls it a receptacle:

> For our earlier discourse the two were sufficient: one postulated as model, intelligible and always unchangingly real; second, a copy of this model, which becomes and is visible. A third we did not then distinguish, thinking that the two would suffice; but now, it seems, the argument compels us to

[3] See also Cheah's wonderful reading of Derridian grammatology as an explanation of the errant cause.

[4] Much as Freud admits his inability to fully understand how girls experience the Oedipus complex, Timaeus admits that he cannot account for the necessity of necessity in his account, saying "you must not demand the explanation of me" (47).

> attempt to bring to light and describe a form difficult and obscure. What nature must we, then, conceive it to possess and what part does it play? This, more than anything else: that it is the Receptacle – as it were, the nurse – of all Becoming. (48)

What emerges from this receptacle, this "matrix for everything" (48)? What always comes out of wombs: children. I might now restate the argument that I have been working toward throughout this essay: The sacred child, the fruit of the binding of necessity as errant cause, comes to restore a lost proper order, to obscure the beginning before the beginning, the kind that isn't a kind and to turn the Earth back from matter to matrix. Like Timaeus's discourse, the post-apocalypse, in attempting to restore order, produces the generative fold. For even Timaeus's attempt to obscure the difficulty of this "difficult and obscure" third term gives rise to difficulty for the original paradigm. In her reading of Plato's cosmogony, Judith Butler explains that the chora, given Timaeus' definition, cannot really be a receptacle either, and certainly not a womb because these would be metaphors and the chora

> is not a metaphor based on likeness to a human form, but a disfiguration that emerges at the boundaries of the human both as its very condition and as the insistent threat of its deformation; it cannot take a form, a morphe, and it that sense, cannot be a body. (*Bodies* 41)

In *Bodies that Matter*, from which this passage is drawn, Butler argues for what she calls "the irruptive chora" (41) whose motion is no longer bound to the motives of the mover, but irrupts to distort and deform all distinctions. In the next section, I contend that the

apocalyptic disruption that has produced what Butler calls “the irruptive chora” issued from the domestication of the Earth.

IV

In a series of scenes I’ve come to think of as the Mars theme, the Boy asks the Man about extraterrestrial life:

> Do you think there might be crows somewhere?
>
> I dont know.
>
> But what do you think?
>
> I think it’s unlikely.
>
> Could they fly to Mars or someplace?
>
> No. They couldnt.
>
> Because it’s too far?
>
> Yes.
>
> Even if they wanted to.
>
> Even if they wanted to.
>
> ….
>
> Do we know where Mars is?
>
> Sort of.
>
> If we had a spaceship could we go there?
>
> Well. If you had a really good spaceship and you had people to help you I suppose you could go.
>
> Would there be food and stuff when you got there?
>
> No. There’s nothing there.

Oh.

(McCarthy, *Road* 157 – 158)

I've been arguing so far that McCarthy's apocalypse destabilizes the gendered relations of power between matter and form and gives rise to the sacred male child as its antidote. But the novel doesn't reject matter. Instead, it evinces a complicated relationship to the material world. In this passage, for instance, the Boy tests his intuition that there will be no exit for them when their journey ends at the Atlantic Ocean. They need a Mars, a place where there would be "food and stuff" (158). At the same time, his questions expose how much of the benignity of the planet is the result of technologies of control – like the map and the phone directory and the technologies they represented – that "justified [them] in the world" (182). What they need isn't nature itself, which they have in terrifying abundance, but what Hannah Arendt calls a durable, human world:

> Things and men form the environment for each of man's activities, which would be pointless without such location; yet this environment, the world into which we are born, would not exist without the human activity which produced it, as in the case of a fabricated thing; which takes care of it, as in the case of cultivated land; or which establishes it through organization, as in the case of the body politic. (*Human* 22)

For Arendt, who channels her reading of *The Human Condition* through her scholarship on the ancient world, the private home is where men are "driven by their wants and needs" (30) and for this reason is the space of unfreedom. Like the nature it relies on, the household produces "the least durable of tangible things… [whose] consumption barely survives the act of their production" (96). Food is grown to be eaten and if it isn't eaten

decays and becomes earth again. Undesirable in itself, the private realm maintains the polis. The free movement of men between the private sphere of necessity and the polis where all are of equal standing and none tend to each other's needs and wants make up the human world:

> This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (52)

The fabrication of things not only preserves them from "the natural ruin of time" (55) that drives nature's metabolism, but creates a world, a human world, from out of the rapacity of the natural. The distinguishing mark of the world as distinct from nature is that it "transcend[s] the life-span of mortal men" (55) and can be handed down from one generation to the next as patrimony. This world of fabricated things, and the world it creates for men, is exactly what McCarthy's post-apocalyptic ontology lacks: the connection of the past with the future in a line that produces tables, children and narratives.

The Man sees his son as the restoration of this line of connection that would reinstate lineage and ordered sequence; for this reason, he eschews new creation, using

only the things that remain. Another group, however, has begun to fabricate, and in particular to fabricate weapons and children:

> An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon.… The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry.… Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites. (McCarthy, *Road* 91 – 92)

This is no desperate pitch at survival, but a well-established and well-functioning political economy based on fixed capital, direct ownership of the means of production and military expansion. In this case, the product is meat and the process is agricultural. For the cannibals, farming is also fucking. Though there are many cannibal groups employing many production processes, including scavenging of the dead and culling fresh meat by amputation, all the groups use women's continued fecundity as a replacement for the husbandry they would have practiced on their farm animals if they had not become extinct.[5]

The Man and the Boy rarely encounter cannibals. More frequently, they are alone and vigilant. Yet these few encounters stand in for everything that motivates them on their journey. Their distinction from the cannibals is the source of their civility even

[5] For an interesting intertext, see P.D. James's *The Children of Men,* which posits a world whose agriculture is fine but whose human women have lost the capacity to conceive.

when they must kill the cannibals to survive. In the wake of one such murder, the Boy asks if they are still the good guys. The Man answers: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (77). The terms of this distinction are absolute: the Man does God’s work by killing cannibals, who show themselves to be unworthy of life by pursuing cannibalism. Poised against the sacralization of the Boy, the use of pregnancy as food production appears particularly debased. Yet the same rigid distinction the Man pursues – the ability to discriminate between those worthy to live and those who will be sacrificed -- also informs the cannibals’ practice. Moreover, both receive their sustenance from the child.

The difference lies in the regularity and regimentation of the cannibals’ murders. The cannibal group’s survival quite immediately depends on the suffering of others, but this strategy seems destined to end with the consumption of all by all. Children simply take too long to develop in utero, human litters are too small and babies do not feed enough people to support a community. In order to meet this problem, the cannibals conduct war campaigns, on the one hand, and, on the other, institute rudimentary governance over the production of life. Like the Man’s wife, the women’s job is to produce the future, either literally as nourishment or metaphysically as redemption. Where the Man hopes to restore the grid-work of the world through his son’s divinity, the cannibals have begun to rebuild a human world, a world of fabricated things, through the exploitation of women’s reproductive capacity. Both strategies attempt to rebind the chora to the oikos and both do so through what Arendt calls *biopolitics* or the

management of life itself.[6] For Arendt, biopolitical governance disrupts the balance between the private realm of need and the polis where men are separated and related.[7] This disruption she names the social, which has come to usurp both the home and the polis in modernity. Whereas the classical polis rigorously delegated the labor of life to the household, modern society puts the life process at the center of governmental and economic production. For Arendt, then, the modern world has already become post-apocalyptic in the specific sense that its over-valuation of life has already overwhelmed the separation characteristic of the human world. Rather than re-establishing the boundaries between the polis and the oikos, the Event continues the basic form of contemporary biopolitics. In the figures of the sacred child and the sacrificed child, we can see the dominance and centrality of the biopoliticized oikos where Arendt contends the polis once stood:

> They walked into the little clearing, the boy clutching his hand. They'd taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him.… What the boy has seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. (McCarthy, *Road* 198)

The sacred child faces the sacrificed child across the fire whose guise as domestic cooking hearth never quite disguises its power to burn, just as meat betrays its origins in death. Their redemptive morality comes from their gustatory abstinence, but their

[6] Arendt coined this term. Her use of it precedes Michel Foucault's famous elaboration of it in *The History of Sexuality*.
[7] We should hear in this separation the division that obscures the identity of the chora and the oikos.

recognition that meat requires death does not translate into a refusal to sacrifice. The sacredness of the child is his sacrifice in the service of reestablishing the separation between the production of life and the freedom of men. We have already seen the identity of the oikos and the chora. The cannibal group asks us to consider if the same is not true for the political and the biopolitical.

In their instrumentalization of reproduction, the cannibals engage in one form of the biopolitical elicitation and management of life; however, they do so by recreating the rigid distinction between the polis and the oikos, the free and the enslaved. As a form of sovereignty within biopolitical governance, the cannibals separate life-itself, in the form of meat, from the livingness of a person and elicit the former to care for the latter. The man reverses this. His overvaluation of the living spirit of man causes him to sacrifice the present to his idea of the future. Neither group will accept the absolute exteriority of life, its beast-like fecundity, its systemic complexity and its tendency to move beyond the regulation of any ostensible center.

Such as, for example, the Event. Though never concretized beyond the "shear of light and … series of low concussions" (53), the shape of what remains testifies to the power of the irruptive chora and its coincidence with biopolitical governance. Whether nuclear, natural or divine in origin, the Event's reorganization of the properties of matter continues, rather then breaks with, the industrial production processes whose absence defines life in the post-apocalypse. Arendt argues that industrial production, the form of technicity correspondent to biopolitical governance, has "let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural" (*Human* 47). What interests me here is Arendt's recognition that industrial production processes are a form of nature's productivity made uncanny by

their very profligacy. Rather than an imposition on, or corruption of, nature by culture, this unnatural growth comes from the hyper-abundance of nature. Thus the same industrial products that maintain the social also render the polis indistinct from the oikos by generalizing the natural: "It is against this growth, not merely against society but against a constantly growing social realm, that the private and the intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), on the other, have proved incapable of defending themselves" (47). At her most prophetic, Arendt warns of a total waste economy in which the unnatural growth of nature's metabolism would result in

> things [that] must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end. But if the ideal were already in existence and we were truly nothing but members of a consumers' society, we would no longer live in a world at all but simply be driven by a process in whose ever-recurring cycles things appear and disappear, manifest themselves and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process. (134)

Here Arendt sounds a bit like Jean Baudrillard theorizing the endless play of the simulacra.[8] Under conditions of late capital, however (for what else would we call this waste economy?), the problem with stuff isn't its impermanence but its monstrously outsized permanence.[9] Things may no longer perform the role of mediator of human life, but they instead threaten to overwhelm civilization with an onslaught of used-up product.

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[8] See Baudrillard *Simulacra.*

[9] In my usage, the term "industrial processes" includes contemporary post-Fordist production. Though I recognize the important differences between high and late capitalism, my emphasis is on the elicitation of matter's metabolism for the production of the human world.

The absorption of the public by the social and its biopolitical economies of production inaugurates a new, inhuman duration that uses the world-making capacity of stuff to entrench humanity in a newly menacing nature: on one hand, the steroidal strength of industrial production in globalization; on the other, the endless lifespan of the plastic disposable. Whereas generationality promises continued action within human permanence, the inhuman duration is indifferent to man.

Industrial production processes and waste economies may seem like the antithesis of the problems introduced by the post-apocalypse, whose lack of industry conditions the need for cannibalism. The novel, however, often takes time away from the plot to note instances of the sudden indistinction between the newly menacing post-apocalyptic nature and the legacies of human production processes when unbound from their stabilizing grid-work. In this scene, for example, the lake the boy points out on the horizon reveals itself on further inspection to be the legacy of man's fabrication, specifically of a dam:

> What is that, Papa?
>
> It's a dam.
>
> What's it for?
>
> It made the lake. Before they built the dam that was just a river down there. The dam used the water that ran through it to turn the big fans called turbines that would generate electricity.
>
> To make lights.
>
> ….
>
> Will the dam be there for a long time?

> I think so. It's made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even.
>
> (McCarthy, *Road* 19 – 20)

The monumentality of dam construction, so evocative of modernist industrialism and its confident conquest of nature, so often erected on human suffering, bridges Arendt's two durations. Without the promise of patrimony and a human world, the dam is revealed as what it always had been, an instance of matter's mutability rather than the basis for those winking houselights the Man saw from his uncle's boat.

Is this to say that the end of the world is equivalent to the end of capitalism? On the contrary, nature's sudden implacability leaves the remnants of industrial processes as the only source of survival given the Boy and the Man's gustatory abstinence. The novel even goes so far as to incorporate at its center a miniature of the lost human world. In an extended scene of restored domesticity that literalizes Jameson's notion that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (*Archaeology* 199) and repeats in even fuller fashion the small moment of redemption enabled by the Man's discovery of an unopened Coke (McCarthy, *Road* 23),[10] the man and the boy stumble upon a fallout shelter:

> Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets.
>
> ….

[10] Calling to mind the 1971 Coca-Cola advertising campaign theme song "I'd Like to Teach the World To Sing/ I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke."

> Is it okay for us to take it?
>
> Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to.
>
> ….
>
> There were knives and plastic utensils and silverware and kitchen tools in a plastic bag. A can opener.
>
> ….
>
> He took two paperware bowls from a stack of them wrapped in plastic and set them on the table. (138 - 141)

In one sense, this scene constructs a heroics of capitalism. In its recitation of the goods that will assure a few more days or weeks of survival, the passage seems to urge its readers to appreciate the material wealth capitalism provides. In another sense, though, the juxtaposition of material abundance with starvation uncomfortably mimics the inequalities of contemporary capital and the tendency of mass production processes to create both deprivation and overproduction. For Arendt the poverty of mass culture comes from the rapid and prolific production of petroleum-based consumer goods, the steroidal strength and the endless lifespan of the plastic disposable. She writes:

> The weirdness of this situation (in which things last far longer than they are used) resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, though some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst. (*Human* 53)[11]

I'd like to offer the vanished table as a symbol of the post-apocalypse. Yet, I don't mourn its passing. The table formed the space of patriarchy. In its guise as grid or ledger, the

[11] Arendt's table references Marx's famous analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, 163.

table delineates inside from outside, proper from improper, actor from acted-upon, zoë from bios. As calendar or chronology, it relates men to the past they represent and the future they pioneer. As grid or zone, it marks off spaces of privileged privacy from the spaces of abjection that sustain them. In the post-apocalypse of late capitalism, the insistence on these distinctions is directly proportional to the menace of a nature no longer amenable to them and no longer willing to be passively acted upon. The "picnic table"[12] at which the cannibals and the Man and the Boy sup may be a diminished version of the table of patriarchy, but it represents nonetheless an attempt to refurbish the chora as the oikos, to decorate the house of man so that it no longer resembles the cave. Yet waste economies rely on and hyper-stimulate the mutability of matter. Little wonder, then, that the same mass production processes that undermine the human world would elicit this "ominous and real" ("Exclusive") postapocalyptic setting. The "unnatural growth of natural processes" (*Human* 52), as Arendt puts it, relies on the precarious near-uncontrollabilty of nature, its tendency to move. At stake in McCarthy's post-apocalypse is less the authority of sons against the fallen feminine, than the apprehension that nature under conditions of capital might return as the irruptive chora to threaten patrilineal transmission.

The distinctions enabled by the table are first of all distinctions in space. Walking through a ransacked library, the Man "picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation" (McCarthy *Road* 187). In addition to an "expectation" (187), we

[12] My gratitude to Robert Reid-Pharr for suggesting this phrase to me.

might call it a material-discursive technology in the service of a metaphysics. The metaphysics of the table applies just as well to the gate between the domestic interior and the exposed exterior or to the fence that marks off the plot of land that will become resource from the plot that remains nature, as it does to the ordered rows of books on the shelves and shelves in the room. These sorts of material-discursive technologies separate one space from another, but they also order time as if it were space. Like the cells of a calendar, time in its movement becomes ordered rows and ranks of days and weeks. This, too, the Event undoes. Without the grid-work that maintained the distinction between the Earth and the human world, days become middle durations without end, enduring exposure deprived of causal progression.

Not only the books as bound objects ordered in rows, but narratives too act as material-discursive technologies. The man bemoans the new sort of day, unimpeded by "lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later" (54). Unmoored from spatial distinction, time shifts away from the satisfying arc of narrative and with it from the narrative conventions of community.[13] In "Endings, Continued," Frank Kermode argues that narratives create patterns, and the end of the narrative seals those patterns, thus opening them to interpretation as a unity. Deprived of an ending, the story strands all those "ticks that [would] become tocks, seasons that [would] replace mere seconds, antitypes [that would] fulfill remote types" (91) in a finished work. As examples of the legibility produced by knowing how something ends, all of these refer to time. Endings, it seems, make time predictable. Surveying the whole pattern, the tick becomes legible as precedent to the tock. Without this total pattern, the

[13] Interestingly, Teresa deLauretis argues for the consonance of narrative expectations and the rhythmic expectations of intercourse. See her *Alice*.

tick would stand without import or prophetic message, a singularity whose presence repudiates the hermeneutic project because it means only itself, without predicates.

It is therefore all the more compelling that the novel refuses to end. Much as it began twice, so it ends twice. The first ending we have already had occasion to explore: the Boy finds a new mother in the wake of his father's death. Her reassuring vision of ontology as a great chain of breath passed from God to man and from father to son down through time promises restored succession and renewed temporal order, exposure hypostatized as continuity and containment with the divine. Here is the second ending:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy, *Road* 287)

Note how the voice shifts here. No longer wrathful or awed by an alien Earth, perhaps not even the same narrator, this voice encompasses and surrounds the Event. "Once," it says, as if beginning a series or a storybook. "Once there were brook trout" and if brook trout, then birds, if birds then perhaps Mars too carried the imprint of a map legible to man, to the Man, a map whose mystery names a location, an egress from the maze or a point from which to survey the whole wonderful, mysterious, conquerable pattern.[14] Yet the attempt

[14] For another viewpoint on mapping see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 413-418.

to create a cartography of the end generates a temporal crisis. Becomings are unmappable. Only what has already become meets the requirements for representation. "Maps of the world in its becoming" (287) can only be written by a cartographer who has slipped outside of time. But for the timeless cartographer there would be no such thing as becoming, only plans and patterns and maps. Thus while the apocalypse provides the formal closure necessary for the cartographic perspective, the post-apocalyptic aftermath in which the cartographer is located opens the apocalypse to further – unmappable – becomings in time.

V

Such is the import of a long but structurally unnecessary scene whose skewed repetitions of the conventions of the post-apocalypse, and especially of the figure of the road, complicate a too-close alliance between the novel's import and the Man's choice of narrative frames. Interestingly, the novel's own encoding of the spatio-temporal apocalyptic problem comes in the form of a critique of community. In this scene the Man and the Boy meet a man named Ely, whose name and blindness suggest that he is a prophet. After satisfying themselves that he is not going to harm them, they ask him to share their dinner and question him about his life on the road. A scene of this nature, and it is the only scene of non-cannibalistic communal consumption in the novel, should inaugurate what Fredric Jameson calls the apocalypse's "secret Utopian vocation" to "assembl[e] a new community of readers and believers around itself" (*Archaeology* 199). Instead, it plays with the terms on which we recognize community. Like the dream of the cave and its doubling of the barren wastes of the world with the intimation of

subterranean fecundity, so the Man and the Boy's encounter with an apparently senile old man suggests a form of community that remains after the disaster.

Critics of the novel have used this scene to argue for the importance of the boy's compassion, his worthiness of protection and valorization.[15] And, indeed, the Man and the Boy only stop to eat with Ely because of the Boy's insistent appeals, first to give him a can of mixed fruit in syrup and then to invite him to have supper with them. The Man begrudgingly allows it, but Ely takes more convincing. The Man asks: "When did you eat last?" and after a little back and forth Ely answers ambiguously, "I ate just now" (166 - 167). His evasions are defensive; they anticipate malice. But their quality of missed reference and obscured meaning begins to take on new resonances. At first, Ely's answers seem designed to make him appear harmless:

> Do you want to eat with us?
>
> I dont know
>
> You dont know?
>
> Eat what?
>
> Maybe some beef stew. With crackers. And coffee.
>
> What do I have to do?
>
> Tell us where the world went.
>
> What?
>
> You dont have to do anything. Can you walk okay?
>
> I can walk.
>
> He looked down at the boy. Are you a little boy? he said.

[15] See, for example Ron Charles's review of the novel for *The Washington Post*.

What does he look like? his father said.

I dont know. I cant see good.

(166)

The spare prose in this section reveals little of gesture or tone; yet, it seems clear that the Man asks his question – "Tell us where the world went" (166), perhaps the only real question he could pose – because he believes Ely incapable of understanding it, but also because he should have understood it if he were in possession of his faculties, just as he takes it for granted that Ely tells him of his blindness in answer to his question about the Boy. As the conversation continues, however, the problem of reference comes increasingly to supplant the question of Ely's sanity. Once again, the Man poses a question about survival that presumes a shared set of references tied to their shared post-apocalyptic setting:

How long have you been on the road?

I was always on the road. You cant stay in one place.

How do you live?

I just keep going. I knew this was coming.

You knew it was coming?

Yeah. This or something like it. I always believed in it.

Did you try to get ready for it?

No. What would you do?

I don't know.

> People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didnt believe in that. Tomorrow wasnt getting ready for them. It didnt even know they were there.
>
> (168)

For the Man, the road is a synecdoche. His question makes clear that he believes in the limited duration of anyone's stay on the road. Limited on one side by the Event and on the other by the to-be-determined telic ending, the Man believes that the road will literally run out and so no one should be forever on it. Ely's apparent lack of comprehension, especially concerning the Man's query, allows him to slyly refute these assumptions. Although it might well be an admission of a literal pre-Event homelessness, Ely's assertion that he was "always on the road" also blurs the line of demarcation the Man labors to establish between the "world" (166) the Event took away and the road they travel in the wake of its disappearance. For the Man, tomorrow is a place on a map and a step on a carefully planned journey whose end point is the world's restoration. Ely replaces the Man's figurative use of the idea of the road with a figure of his own: a personified tomorrow. Much like Ely himself, tomorrow is just a stranger on the road, a figuration that slyly repeats the Man's spatial understanding of the future. Moreover, his personification of tomorrow casts into doubt the Man's assumption that Ely's foreknowledge that "this was coming" (168) references the same "this" the Man means. For Ely, in other words, every day contains its own "this-ness," its own unplanned-for event. While the Man believes that he offers hospitality to Ely, his hospitality comes at the price of committing to a shared narrative line. Instead, Ely represents what Derrida calls the stranger "who is already found within":

> more intimate with one than one is oneself, the absolute proximity of a stranger whose power is singular *and* anonymous, an unnameable and neutral power,[16] that is, undecidable, neither active nor passive, an an-identity that, *without doing anything*, invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it. (emphasis his, *Specter* 172)

Ely does not refuse to recognize the difference between then and now; he refuses to recognize the difference of that difference or their ownership over their circumstances. Instead, in his most explicit overturning of the terms the Man brings to the conversation, he tells the Man that they are not survivors in the sense he means: "If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we'd have something to talk about. But we're not. So we don't" (McCarthy *Road*, 172). Of course, the hypothetical situation the old man negates is exactly the narrative context and his invocation of it here, even in negation, demonstrates that he understands it. He refuses the name; he refuses to accede to the specification of language. As Derrida writes:

> Now, all *this*, *this* about which we have failed to say anything whatsoever that is logically determinable, *this* that comes with so much difficulty to language, *this* that seems not to mean anything, *this* that puts to rout our meaning-to-say, making us speak regularly from the place where we want to say nothing, where we know clearly what we do not want to say but do not know what we would like to say, as if *this* were no longer either of the order of knowledge or will or will-to-say, well, *this* comes back, *this*

[16] "Ely" is a pseudonym, a road-name.

> returns, *this* insists in urgency, and *this* gives one to think, but *this*, which is each time irresistible enough, singular enough to engender as much anguish as do the future and death, *this* stems less from a "repetition automatism" (of the automatons that have been turning before us for such a long time) than it gives us to think all *this, altogether other, every other,* from which the repetition compulsion arises: that every other is altogether other. (emphasis his, *Specter* 173)

It is possible to read this refusal as a sign of the trauma Ely has undergone in the wake of, and perhaps before, the Event. In *After the End: Representations of the Post-Apocalypse,* James Berger relates the amorphous cataclysms of post-apocalyptic fiction with the genocides of the 20th century. He argues that the strange gaps in temporality and the odd slides away from shared references endemic to the genre reflect the distortion that trauma introduces into memory and thus into collective psychic life. Defined by Sigmund Freud as the temporal wound in the psyche inflicted by a sight so inassimilable to the subject that it must be repressed and continually re-lived, trauma distorts lived time by making the past into an ever-repeating present.[17] In Berger's reading, post-apocalypses are a symptom of trauma. Their generic conventions are like the repetition compulsions of neurotics: their devastated landscapes exteriorize internal devastation; their unspecified Events mimic the unlivable event that traumatic psychic wounding covers over; and their profound sense of a terminal consciousness lingering beyond the event horizon engenders the longing for a total disaster that would bring catastrophic history to a close. We watch

[17] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.*

them and read them obsessively, Berger contends, because they recode historical trauma as the end of history and offer the illusion of a final end commensurate with the scope and intensity of the damage. Though set in the future, the narrative present contains only "remainders and reminders, signs and symptoms that survive" (26) from the past.

Berger's reading of the apocalypse highlights its temporal convolutions in order to advocate for a full restoration of the order lost in the rupturing of narrative unity and durational succession. As such, he contends that in narrating beyond the end and in cataloging what remains, the postapocalypse prepares for a second, more fulfilling entelechy, one that gives a final shape to the events of history and redeems the wisdom of prior generations by bringing them forward into narrative closure. If the apocalyptic event disorders time, understood here as proper mastery over experience and thus subjectivity, then the post-apocalypse quests to restore that order and so to cure traumatic repetition. Berger's unabashed embrace of the ordered subject breaks markedly from the post-structural critique of subjectivity (as, for instance, always out of time with itself) and from the queer theoretical privileging of the jouissance that shatters subjectivity by exposing its always already shattered condition.[18]

Using Berger's paradigm, we might read Ely's odd comment as a naïvely honest, if psychically damaged, appraisal of his situation. He cannot be identified with something that he has not actually experienced. Moreover, if tomorrow is the name he gives to a past event, the unplanned-for Event, then it is exactly as a survivor that his psychic wounds prevent him from seeing a true future. Indeed, in psychoanalytic terms, his resistance to the narrative framing that goes with it would indicate the accuracy of that diagnosis. Yet

[18] See my Chapter 4, below, for a fuller discussion of this concept.

this explanation does not fully satisfy. Like the sound waves of an echo, Ely's replies describe the space of the Man's fixed expectations at the same time that the time they take to cross that space distorts their meaning. Moreover, while apocalypse narratives clearly do bear some relationship to historical catastrophes, that explanation works by triangulating a historical event with a historico-national psyche and representative works of fiction and philosophy in order to finish what the catastrophe leaves undone – e.g., the apocalyptic closure of time via the closed loop of causation. That this attempt fails and must be reiterated, I argue, has less to do with traumatic repetition in the Freudian psychoanalytic sense than it does with the formal logic of the apocalypse, which promises the map of becoming, but whose viewing platform, though ostensibly spatially removed, requires a continuing temporal duration and thus further becoming. As Tina Pippin explains:

> Every apocalypse is a sequel. A sequel is a work which follows another work and can be complete in itself and seen in relation to the former and to what follows it. The story becomes the neverending story, in ever-evolving renditions. (1)

One might object that *any* word would fit into the place held by the apocalypse in the above quotation since nothing in this world stands outside of the ordering power of the iterative series – except the apocalypse, which should stand as the bracket closing the series and enabling the performance of operations on that series. What Pippin's observation points up is the insoluble aporia at the heart of the apocalypse. As one in an ongoing iterative series, the never-ending story of the apocalypse is just history. Yet the apocalypse as augur of the revelation of the eternal should be opposed to what Walter

Benjamin calls the "wreckage of history" (*Illuminations* 257). The apocalypse should not be the force of futurity in human history *and* the destined end-point of human history. It cannot be both the movement of history and the telos of history without bifurcating and becoming double. And yet that is apparently just how it operates: the apocalypse as the time beyond the unfolding of time is haunted by its double, the apocalypse as force of futurity.

VI

Questions of time have been central to readings of the apocalypse. Popular receptions tend to frame time in terms of timeliness. In the interview with McCarthy cited above, Winfrey notes that "if the book had been written twenty or twenty-five years ago, it would have seemed futuristic." In discriminating between proper and improper times for such representations, her remarks implicitly pose the question "Why now?" as if post-apocalypses were always a reflection of their moments of composition. Yet the timeliness of the post-apocalypse contains in its own irony: the time after the apocalypse, no matter how timely, cannot be the present in which we write. The very recitation of timeliness presumes that the content stands as an analogy for the present. However, if it is about the present, it cannot be after the apocalypse. Indeed, the claim that a particular story feels timely often comes weighted against the assertion that certain other subgeneric forms no longer bear relevance to our times, as for instance has happened to cold-war era nuclear apocalypses. The post-apocalypse, in other words, seems to generate historiography and

aesthetic lineage, with all the privilege those writerly practices accord to exclusive taxonomies and categorical descriptions.[19]

Framing the post-apocalypse as if it could only be about the moment of its composition assumes, even if it doesn't quite assert, that its structure is unavoidably allegorical.[20] In one sense, this unavoidable necessity arises from the same source as its inexorable irony: the fantastical elements of the story. Without the mechanism of allegory, according to this theory, these elements would have at most a symbolic, and thus largely psychological, power to captivate. Yet the admission of fantasy has the ironic effect of deauthorizing the future. If the wasted landscape of the post-apocalypse analogizes the world-wasting capacity of nuclear weapons, then we can read these narratives as warnings to action. In other words, analogies and allegories, by locating the problem in the present, didactically advocate management of the present and for the future. In this sense, the post-apocalypse acts as a prophylactic against the very feeling of foreboding its plot aspires to inspire, militating in its form against what it prophesies in its content. If *The Road*, in other words, is timely, that is, if it is about the contemporary moment, it cannot be a dire warning for the future, since allegorical readings begin by dismissing the future setting as the site of the fantasy whose implausibility conditions the

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[19] See, for instance, Ketterer, *New World*, whose claim to timeliness comes from the bomb: "[The apocalypse] is a legitimate topic of unavoidable universal concern, particularly today, when fictive intimations of catastrophe gain credibility from the existence of nuclear weapons. For the first time, man has it in his power to be the instigator of a do-it-yourself apocalypse" (4).

[20] The literature on allegory, even if restricted to the 20th century, is vast because its amenability to the sign/signifier distinction makes it an apt example genre for semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction. I draw on only a small bit of that rich dialogue here. But see, for a sense of the scope of its uses, Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* and Barbara Johnson's "Women and Allegory" in her *The Wake of Deconstruction*.

need for a second, implicit level of meaning. It is at this second or allegorical level that the work can be said to speak of the present. On the other hand, the post-apocalypse is not synonymous with the present since a truly post-apocalyptic present would render these works mimetic rather than allegorical.[21] The restless assignation of proper timing and the discriminating construction of proper lineage bespeak instead the unsettling aporia, the untimeliness, of the post-apocalypse.[22]

In sum, then, we might say that the post-apocalypse prevents in one register what it exacerbates in another. Its content succumbs to reduction as one or another contemporary event, the timely corollary to the work's allegorical setting. For instance, *The Road* has been read as if it were really about the contemporary shift in global weather patterns or the financial crisis. These allegorical corollaries, on the surface quite upsetting, actually provide a degree of relief. We can be just as assured of the passing of these events as we are certain of the passage of events across a news cycle. It is possible to read these references as an attempt to raise the reader's consciousness of future perils, that is, to install in the reader the impulse to fill in the missing causal links that would make these current events the past for a prophecy of our collective future. In this sense, the post-apocalyptic future would bear an allegorical relationship to the consequences of

[21] This figure-eight structure, I argue in Chapter 1, above, also lattices the architecture of hortatory environmentalist writings, especially in speculative non-fictional works that project a future from out of a hypothetical situation such as Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*. The only significant difference between the "warning" offered by postapocalyptic fiction and that offered by non-fictional accounts of environmental disease comes from the source of the labor. In the former, the reader does the labor of interpreting the allegory while in the latter the writer's task is to put future conditions and present events into coordinated cause and effect chains.

[22] This reading of apocalypse's allegorical irony borrows much from Paul De Man's reading of allegory as the narrative mode most closely associated with time in its passing. See De Man *Blindness*.

present action rather than to the present in its insularity. Here, too, though, what appears as a spur to strong emotion meets the problem of the logic of the apocalypse. No event, as such, can be apocalyptic; so, all events, no matter how devastating, must be part of an ongoing series.

The assignment of a historical cause, moreover, commits one to the very difference between continuity and contingency that the apocalypse puts into crisis. If we say, for instance, that the Holocaust *caused* Walter Benjamin to look for redemption in Jewish theology, as I discuss in slightly different terms below, then we have distinguished between the historical, and therefore passing, and the eternal. Yet this assurance of historical continuity only shifts the aporia of the apocalypse to another register. The timely, the passing, cannot help but take the form of an event with specifiable features; the end of time, the apocalypse, can never be an event that occurs in time. The irony of the timely apocalypse is thus double: it cannot be of this time and it cannot be of time at all, since the apocalypse ends time. Instead, the now-time proper to the apocalypse retreats endlessly into the future because of its incommensurability with the temporal. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot explains the problem of timing that accompanies Messianic thinking:

> And if it happens that to the question "When will you come?" the Messiah answers, "Today," the answer is certainly impressive: so, it is today! It is now and always now. There is no need to wait, although to wait is an obligation. And when is it now? When is the now which does not belong to ordinary time, which necessarily overturns it, does not maintain but destabilizes it? When? (142)

To ask "When?" of the apocalypse, and I take this to be Blanchot's point, is to ask the question that has been unavoidably built into the structure of the apocalypse (what we might almost rename the "to-come") and yet it is to ask the very thing that the apocalypse as such cannot answer because the question is posed in the language of the temporal.[23] To ask "When?" is to already presume the linear unfolding of time-in-its-passing that is anathema to the apocalypse. Yet the history of millenarian movements evidences the structural necessity of, and the persistence with which the apocalypse elicits, the question of time and timing.[24] We might even be compelled to argue that the apocalypse – whose own proper time is for Blanchot outside of the impropriety of unredeemed time – mimics the movement of history by drawing the present toward an ever-receding future. Bizarrely, then, and against all expectations, the apocalypse appears to be the very movement of history as well as the denigration of that history. Walter Benjamin's work attempts to elucidate this odd and apparently contradictory double injunction, where what comes to pass before the apocalypse is both necessary and totally irrelevant. Thus the emptiness and silence of revelation, its apophancy and negativity, shine out with particular strength when compared to the profligacy of history's products. In the much-cited 9th thesis from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" he names this the "wreckage"(257) of history. Though very well-known, the passage is worth considering in full:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly

[23] On the silent prophet see Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone," and Derrida "How to Avoid."

[24] Benjamin's dialectics at a standstill may be understood in this sense as a pointed refusal of the apocalypse's elicitation of the prophetic.

> contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned to the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257)

The apocalypse, then, stops history, and with it the meaningless accumulation of unconnected events. But if, from the angel's perspective, history looks like a garbage dump strewn with the fragments of a former unity, Benjamin tells us that this is because the angel is also stuck in that history, indeed is the source of that history. True to his essay's opening parable about the mechanical chess-player named historical materialism who is secretly animated by the hideous hunchback of theology, Benjamin describes the angel of history as one element in a broader onto-theological chronotope. History, in this chronotope, describes the space between paradise and the future to which the angel is propelled by the winds of paradise. In a purely theological accounting, the space at the edge of the chronotope that Benjamin designates "the future" (257) would be clearly marked with the name *redemption*. If this passage resists a theological reading despite its religious overtones, it is because it sets the stage for the redemption that it then refuses to affirm or even to name. Without it, we are stuck in the angel's perspective, in which the

speedy accumulation of the wreckage of history will never allow the time to put anything to right.

Yet the passage hinges around the transition word "but." Everything after that word asks us to imagine another perspective from the angel's, one in which we can see that time, and with it history, come *from* paradise. Whether the storm blows at the behest of paradise or whether paradise is racked with uninvited heavy weather, Benjamin again leaves ambiguous. The difference, though, is crucial. Were the storm to be pushing the angel toward redemption, rather than just the future, then we might say that time is the necessary middle step in the dialectic of redemption. If this were the case, then the final irony of the apocalypse would be that it ends history by the same route that it elicits and makes history necessary: the dictates of paradise. In other words, in order for there to be a time of no time, time must keep spooling into the future. What alleviates the hopelessness of history, we might even say the reality of death, is the promise of a redemption that will take the place of the future, that will fold over onto itself to redeem what has come before and awaken the dead.

Of course, this is just what Benjamin will not affirm, for reasons of theology equally as much as for its political implications.[25] How might we understand the storm in paradise if not as a part of the dialectic of redemption? Benjamin's use of the ambiguous word "future" (257) in this passage suggests that he was imagining just such a possibility. In thesis B, the last thesis in the essay and the last words in *Illuminations*, Benjamin admits the centrality of timing to the apocalypse. Yet, he argues, this contamination of

[25] For Marxist materialists, e.g., the future holds open the space for a secular redemption, in the form of a new social organization. Benjamin parses the difference between the future and the redemptive to account for the untimeliness of the Messiah.

the apocalypse by time only makes the past more worthy of our attention, since it is the necessary precondition of redemption. The storm that might have represented some other force of futurity turns out to serve redemption after all:

> The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance – namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (264)

In the thesis immediately preceding this one, Benjamin argues against the historicists' retrospective assignation of causality to historical events. The historicist, he suggests, acts as if he were a soothsayer able to draw loops of cause and effect to enchain the past to the present. A historian who renounces historicist causality also "stops telling the sequence of events like beads on a rosary" (263), [26] a chain whose closed loop accepts the finality of the present, as if there was no wind from paradise distorting the meanings and value of that present, turning it all into refuse. Indeed, the historicist values the garbage for the role it plays in history. Instead the true historian must "grasp the constellation" (263), in the words of thesis A, or pursue remembrance, as thesis B advocates, in order to see

[26] The explicit inclusion of non-Jewish religious practice seems significant, though I can only speculate on the theological distinction he is drawing here.

through the past and the present to what thesis B calls "the strait gate" and thesis A "'the time of now' which is shot through with chips of messianic time" (263). As if in answer to Blanchot's "When?" Benjamin asks us to turn our backs on the redemptive future, to stop awaiting the coming of what cannot come at all in the normal sense of time's passing, and instead to remember – perhaps literally in the hopes of re-membering – the chips or fragments of messianic time that will provide the seed for the apocalypse's redemption of history.[27] If Benjamin reiterates the Jewish theological prohibition on looking to the future to discover the exact moment of redemption, it is in part because the apocalypse cannot be known as an event and in part because the "magic" (257) of the soothsayers' predictions of the future overvalues the moment of transformation at the expense of the dialectical process of redemption. If the storm blows from paradise, in other words, and if not even the angel of history can stop it, then why long for its cessation? On the contrary, for Benjamin, the portents of the Messiah must be sought in the minor offerings of history, its wreckage and waste, in which it is one's task to find and cherish the sacred.

Trauma apocalyptics sees the post-apocalypse as a narrative attempt to heal a narrative problem by re-establishing the proper chronology and the proper place of the subject on a time-line. We have already seen how chronology spatializes time and in so doing further complicates the temporal aporia of the apocalypse. We might read Benjamin as offering a solution to this problem. In Benjamin's ambiguous use of futurity in the 9th thesis, then, the products of history already harbor fragments of the messianic time, which we may discover secreted away in their inward-most parts, but whose exact

[27] Another reading of this passage, more common in theoretical discourse, rightly and usefully privileges its Nietzschian view of history as genealogy rather than chronology.

nature we cannot know. Thus we must look away from the future to find that which takes the place of the future. To do otherwise, to look to the future as the soothsayers do, is to mistake the chips of messianic time that illumine the present for an event – a cause – the calculation of whose signs and portents make a fetish of the future. By holding open the future as the time of redemption but refusing to calculate its progression, the Jewish theological tradition Benjamin calls upon institutes its own formal closure that avoids the apocalyptic dilemma by always closing around the present.

In *The Coming Community,* Giorgio Agamben relates a parable that speaks to the epistemological effects of the closure of time around the present. He paraphrases a parable told to Ernst Bloch by Benjamin, who got it from his friend and interlocutor Gershom Scholem:

> There is a well-known parable about the Kingdom of the Messiah[…]: "A rabbi, a real cabalist, once said that in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything. But this small displacement is so difficult to achieve and its measure is so difficult to find that, with regard to the world, humans are incapable of it and it is necessary that the Messiah come. (53)

If it is impossible for humans to effect this displacement, which we might also call an unveiling, it is not so much a problem of space as of time. The move to remembrance or to attentive observation of the objects within range of the senses, "this cup, this bush, this stone" (53), as Benjamin tells us the Jewish theological tradition prescribes, circumvents

- but only by way of denial - the magic of the future so aptly described by Lee Edelman in this essay's second epigraph. Edelman and Benjamin make for an unexpected alliance, for all the reasons detailed in the last section.[28] Yet Edelman closes *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* with a long anecdote involving a conversation between Benjamin and Bertold Brecht, whom he remembers telling him:

> that life, despite Hitler, goes on, there will always be children.… But then … something else asserted itself, which Brecht expressed as he stood before me in the grass, with a passion he seldom shows. "In the fight against them nothing must be omitted. Their intentions are not trivial. They are planning for the next thirty thousand years. Monstrous. Monstrous crimes. They stop at nothing. They hit out at everything. Every cell flinches under their blows. That is why not one of us can be forgotten. They deform the baby in the mother's womb. We must under no circumstances leave out the children." While he spoke I felt a force acting on me that was equal to that of fascism; I mean a power that has its source no less deep in history than fascism. (151)

Brecht appears to want to list the fetus in its womb as an example of the here-and-now as worthy of inclusion in the list of those who cannot be forgotten as any other. Yet he cannot escape from the duality that accompanies the child-figure. Locatable in the here-and-now, the child is also a living emblem of the future that will continue no matter how badly we in the here-and-now fail to live up to our duty to usher in the future. Yet it is for

[28] Their capacity to be allied at all, given what I have said about Berger and Benjamin, testifies to Benjamin's Janus-face. As in the first thesis of "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin's chessplayer is always animated by the little hunchback of theology. As I elaborate later, this comparison is equally telling about queer theory.

the same reason that we must feel that obligation all the more pointedly. Like the stone, the cup and the bush, we can only hail the sacred future immanent within, but beyond the scope of, the material things of this world. Edelman glosses this as "'the fascism of the baby's face,' which subjects us to its sovereign authority as the figure of politics itself, that is, in its radical form as reproductive futurism, whatever face a particular politics gives that baby to wear"(151). Against the Nazi's attempted colonization of the "next thirty thousand years" (151), against the magic of calculating causes, Brecht recommends remembrance, just as Benjamin does in "Theses." Yet both Benjamin and Edelman find a reason, in fact the same reason, to be wary of Brecht's impassioned speech: not just the children or even the "baby in the mother's womb" (151) but what Edelman refers to as the "reproductive futurism" (151) that turns those children into figures of futurity.

While Edelman makes a point of demonstrating the centrality of the death drive to reproductive futurism - "the death drive," he writes," "lives within reproductive futurism" (132) robbing the "cradle [which] bears always the meaning of futurity and the futurity of meaning" (117) of its complacency - what remains unstated in Benjamin's writing and in the post-apocalyptic more broadly is its profound anthropocentricism. Despite his rejection of the so-called "great deeds" model of history and despite the suggestion that history might be a force like the weather rather than the result of humanity's exceptional will to create culture, there remains little sense of evolutionarily biological, let alone geological, time on the way to Benjamin's future. The winds from paradise may blow the angel of history forward, but the unstated term in Benjamin's equation requires a different source of prolongation: the generation of children who will be there to act as the living promise of divine wreckage to come. Despite the prohibition on futurity and desire,

despite the mandate to engage with the stuff of today, in a "radical coming without reserve that expends itself improvidently, holding nothing in trust for tomorrow and therefore all faith in … narrative intelligibility" (132) as Edelman writes, tomorrow, the future are not the real terms. Rather, the sacred child promises the end of futurity, the closure of time and thus the proper mapping of the cup, bush and stone. The resolution Benjamin offers, however, the injunction to remembrance of the past and delight in the stuff of the present, in no way neutralizes what Edelman calls "the nightmare of history" (149) that continuously threatens with the promise of more future because the only way to the future-without-future is through the spooling of time through infinite tomorrows. Though his background in queer theory and psychoanalysis obscures the appeal, Edelman's privileging of "the death drive that lives within reproductive futurism" (132) recalls Benjamin's chips of messianic time. In both instances, the sensuously material subject of the touch – the cup, the stone, the bush - reverses like a pocket to reveal its hidden relation to an exterior, regardless of whether we designate its effect as *jouissance* or the sacred. The things of this world, irreparably exposed to the forces of time, in their wasting away as garbage, describe in negative the coming redemption, in anticipation of which we must continue the production of further tomorrows.

VII

The distinguishing "post" of contemporary post-apocalypses marks the crossing of these two figures, the place where the bent figure of time that won't stop coming despite the concussive effect of catastrophe meets the figure in whose form is announced the revelation of redemption: blind, shuffling Ely meeting the Boy. Rather than meeting the odd convolutions of time in the apocalypse, Berger seeks to rectify them, to set them

straight. But Ely refuses the narrative community such straightness implies. Like the Boy and the Beasts, Ely is a product of the Event, a figure of the wayward, the disjunctive and the queer. As prophet of McCarthy's apocalypse, Ely proffers the end of ends, not the end of the world but the end of the future that houses the possibility of the end or the redemption and thus the end of an apocalyptic telos. While literally post-apocalyptic, Ely's assertion that he "was always on the road" (168) characterizes life as an interminable middle. They are not survivors because such a name would imply that they could define themselves against a determinate past and toward an ultimate conclusion. "You just dont want to say it in front of the boy" (172), he scoffs. What the Man doesn't want to say in front of the Boy is that they may not have a story at all. "Do you think your fathers are watching?" rages the narrator, "That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (106). As the novel's representative, Ely rebukes the Man for even asking for a predicate or a nomination, a shared story that would bind them together in a quest. Without such a story to tell, the novel can't meet our expectation that Ely will become a member of their little group. There can be no group. As Jameson writes, "the apocalyptic narrative no longer acknowledges" (*Archaeology* 199) the political. Ely's insistent refusal of communal sentiment tasks them instead with imagining a new form of political community indifferent to definitional predication beyond, what Giorgio Agamben, in *The Coming Community*, calls "being the *thus*" (italics his, 105) or being as "whatever being" (1). Toward the end of his elaboration of this concept, Agamben asks:

> What could be the politics of whatever singularity, that is, of a being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging (being

> red, being Italian, being Communist) nor by the simple absence of conditions (a negative community, such as that recently proposed in France by Maurice Blanchot), but by belonging itself? (85)

His answer is suggestive for this context. He begins by asserting the utility of predication for the state. Predication should not be taken as a cosmetic adornment overlaying being, but as a form of subjection whose political utility comes out of the close association of a qualified being with a representative state. Being American, for example, effaces the difference between "being" and "American," locates the source of being or vitality in the designated identity and associates both with a national spirit never quite captured by the necessarily changing physical territory, national history and governing bodies. "This is what," he writes, "in our culture, the hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of human life and the vacuous declarations of human rights are meant to hide" (86). That is, the predication that makes life sacred to the state also makes people willing to sacrifice their being in the name of predication, beginning with the community of believers whose presence endows the sacred with its role and its significance.

As we have already seen, the predication the Man desires – the justification that comes from a list of names in a phonebook – slides easily into the redemption promised by the single, sacred life around which a community of believers might gather. As singularities whose belonging cannot be questioned because it is not justified through predication, Ely the prophet and the beast at the lake express the narrator's nightmare recognition of the Earth's lack of predication, which keeps "trundling past the sun and return[ing] again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond" (McCarthy, *Road* 181). The telephone book and the calendar,

the sacred child and the redemptive apocalyptic story are all technologies of predication designed to obscure the irreparably contingent whatever being of the Earth.

Perhaps this then is why Derrida, in the epigraph with which I began this essay, calls the moment of sight the most dangerous of the apocalyptic movement. He calls the moment of seeing "more serious … sometimes more culpable and more dangerous than what follows" (*Raising* 121).[29] In illuminating the interior of the cave, the Man and the Boy see the Earth without the covering of the human world, that is, without predication. Thus the apophancy of revelation; it has no story and precisely nothing to reveal. The danger of such a revelation comes from what Derrida calls the "apocalyptic *pli* [fold, envelope, letter, habit, message]" (157), the invaginating manifold, which, as in the cave, presents the *post* apocalypse as its double, the womb. If the post-apocalypse seems to have moved no further up the list in the endless waiting room of unredeemed time called history, it is because the *pli* folds the announcement of the apocalypse's imminent arrival directly onto the "upheavals, the thunderbolts and earthquakes, the fire, the blood, the mountain of fire and the sea of blood, the afflictions, the smoke, the sulphur, the burning" (157) that restart the predication game of hierarchical authority and telic triumph. As Derrida suggests, as a moment beyond the order of moments but destined to return in what cannot be measured as a moment, the apocalyptic sight of the exterior, like the "future anterior" (*Of Grammatology* 5), "can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity" (5). As I have endeavored to

[29] A number of books attempt to draw together what we might only slightly cynically call "actually existing religion" with post-structuralism. For a thorough overview of the field see Shakespeare (*Derrida*). See also Derrida's own response to attributions of mysticism in his "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in Budick and Iser.

suggest, to think the future or the absolute exterior may indeed require releasing the predication that separates monstrosity and normalcy, the present and the future, the sacred and secular, the eternal and temporal into what Pheng Cheah calls "the structural openness of finite being"("Mattering" 134). Cheah calls on Derrida's elaboration of différance to "deform the opposition between the transcendental and the immanent" (131) in order to give an account of "the peculiar dynamism of the given, which is prior to the distinctions between activity and passivity, form and matter" (134), or the forms of life that prosper without reproduction or cultivation. I will end with Derrida:

> An interval must separate the present from what it is not for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, *thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language* ... ("Différence" 394)

This divide, this fold, this interval invaginates the present in itself and produces the future from out of its splitting. There is no awaiting future; the interval of time in its passing is all we ever get of futurity. And it is quite a lot. When this split, however, finds its way into a metaphysical language premised on the unity of truth and personified in the single, shining face of the sacred, sacrificed child, the generativity of the cave becomes a scandal. In the next chapter, I look at the face of the child to discover the cave in its contours.

Chapter IV

Life Matters Beyond the Child

"Kill metaphor."

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[1]

I

In the first of three promotional posters advertising the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, a man and a young boy walk side-by-side down the middle lane of a highway, the child gripping the man's hand, but falling slightly behind his pace. The man's face is fully bared, craggy, white and vigilantly staring past the camera. An oversized hat obscures the boy's face, but what shows beneath glows with the full light of the picture. The second poster defines the movement of the set. While in the first poster the two figures walk toward the viewer, in the second they walk away. They are further down the road, while the camera remains rooted in place. Though all the viewer sees is their figures in retreat, the man's arm, slung this time behind the boy's back, tells us that the boy has now advanced in front of the man. In the final poster, the road is empty and the tall, leafless trees take the place of the human figures, transforming the road into a clearing in the woods.

This grouping illuminates the figure of the child as it operates as a fold[2] or gathering in contemporary discourse. Luminous in occlusion, the boy draws our eye as he

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[1] *Kafka*, 70.

[2] Deleuze uses the idea of the fold in the process of mattering, as in origami pleats or cell mitosis, in the elaboration of a horizontalizing conceptual lexicon one feature of which is the infolding or invagination of matter and form, nature and culture, thing and concept, or rather their originary indistinction. I adopt it here to indicate the multiplicity of domains and modes of expression that make up the child-figure as well as to intimate the generativity of the child-figure, its ability to iterate folds. See Deleuze, *Fold* 86-95; Deleuze, *Foucault* 101-130; Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 41-47.

draws back from full presence, lingering behind in the first frame, pushed ahead in the second, protected, but also coyly reserved as if to suggest pursuit. Like the movements of the signifier to which Lee Edelman compares him, the child-figure remains tantalizingly out of reach, deferring full revelation to the next frame "in [a] narrative dilation that endlessly begets the future by always deferring it" (*No Future* 86). Drawing and repelling our gaze, the child draws us toward the position of the man, who looms up before us, his lunar face fully available, fully adequate to house our gaze. The boy's transposition across the man's body, on the contrary, marks him as the place of the inaccessible. Arriving too late or too soon, the child never fully reaches the hands that hold him and yet, luminous and supplicant, he presents an image of suffering that demands redress.[3] As Edelman writes, the image of suffering is "always the threatened suffering of an image: an image onto which the face of the human has coercively been projected such that we, by virtue of losing it, must also lose the face by which we think we know ourselves" (*No Future* 108). Thus the hat that hides the child's eyes chastens us to reach out and preserve the life that glows in him at the same time that the erasure of his eyes suggests what might be revealed underneath the hat's drape. The suffering face of the child always

[3] In "Precarious Life," the final essay in the volume of the same name, Judith Butler calls on Emmanuel Levinas's conception of the face as the emblem of ethics to define the problem of suffering and justice in the post-9/11 United States. She writes: "I would like to consider the 'face,' the notion introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, to explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, one that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse" (*Precarious* 131). Though she recognizes the ambivalence of that demand, she ultimately endorses it. In contradistinction to my use of the face here, Butler avers the moral integrity of proper representations, ones that at least metaphorically disclose the vulnerable humanity of the face of the other. My argument here and throughout has been that the sacrality of the child's face, exactly by way of its "humanizing" (Butler, *Precarious* 140) vulnerability, sets the terms by which right action appears both obvious and urgent: in the face of the child, the urgency of environmental control; in the threatened child's face, the urgency of protection.

threatens to dissolve back into the woods to which it leant its spectral humanity.[4]

Thus far, we have pursued this child as representation and as figure, as character and as signifier, as ideological icon and as discursive technology without making the articulations between those modes fully explicit. Indeed, the child-figure benefits from the rich tropological sediment in which it has taken root. Toggling between the child-figure's modes of expression has allowed us to map the web of relations it enables within several discursive ecologies. The questions I have addressed to the child-figure so far concern the meanings it circulates. I asked what we should make of the face of the child, of the pathos that demands and seduces by threatening its own dissolution, and what it makes of us. I looked at novels that feature child characters, therefore, in order to see what meanings the child makes available, such as the valorization of the human future. And I looked at the rhetorical use of the child-figure in order to see the distribution of those meanings across apparently unrelated discourses, such as environmentalism. Within that broad mandate, I looked at what forces animate the child-figure and the capture and control of force through the child-figure. I argued that the child not only takes shape around the meanings she figures, but also maintains in every guise, whether character or trope, sentimental icon or metaphoric economy, a complicated relationship with the question of meaning. As the first quotation from Edelman implies, the child-figure is not one figure among others but the privileged figure of figuration as such. In this sense, the figure of the child trains us as much in the machinery of interpretation as in the sentimental economy of reproductive futurism. The child's multiplex forms nourish it

[4] This analogy also compellingly reveals that the child-figure, definitionally singular because a metonymy for all children, discloses what can only ever be a multiplicity of trees in a woods. Thus his singularization reverses into a swarm. On swarms, see Thacker, "Networks."

and keep it circulating within our interpretive practices, just as its circulation trains us in protocols that put the question of meaning at the center of interpretive practice. In this chapter, I look at that circulation to argue that the child not only figures, or stands in the place of, a set of meanings but also gives figure or shape, itinerary, course or circuit, to our methodologies. Having argued throughout that the child-figure is a technology of capture and control, I turn now to look at its energetic exchanges.

We have had several occasions to note the deferral built into the structure of meaning-based interpretations. Like the child-figure who ambulates just out of our reach, meaning must be pursued, captured and uncovered, and yet it diminishes in proportion to our proximity. If the child-figure takes shape around its deferred presence and if the attempt to capture that deferral and make it present has been one of the key means by which we contain future difference, then pursuing the child-figure through interpretation continues this project. The homology between the child and the signifier thus calls on us to consider what interpretive protocols might avoid complicity with the future mandated by the child-figure and the logic of the signifier it makes sensible. On the other hand, our pursuit of the child importantly revealed a specific historical meaning: the apprehensive recognition of humanity's diminishment. The child-figure promises continued lineage, but it does so through the logic of metonymy: the child relays the past to the future rather than fully embodying that future. Assuaging the anxiety produced by systemic threat to the human future through the child-figure thus generates deferral, displacement and difference as its waste products.

In the famous conclusion to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault dates the emergence of the figure of man as the primary object of the human sciences to the

beginning of the 19th century and then prophecies its inevitable end in the late 20th. He writes:

> [Man] was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangement of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.
>
> If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (387)

To extend his metaphor, we might say that the shape of the face remains in the topography of the beach. For a long moment before the face forms a part of a new geography, it mingles with the sand and tide. The child is such a boundary-figure cast up by the apprehension of man's disappearance and the persistence of the interpretive projects that subtended his emergence. Its presence points to the drag of the retreating episteme but also to the pull of the one approaching. We have been working within the boundaries of their mingled territory.

Foucault describes the three great domains of the last episteme as labor, life and language (*Order* 252). These domains continue in the present episteme, though without the justificatory promise of the figure of man. Whereas the great project of modernity concerned the scientific description of man by man and thus generated "a being whose

nature … is to know nature, and itself, in consequence, as a natural being" (310), the present formation shifts focus from knowledge to techné, from man as the subject and object of knowledge to man as a biologically vulnerable, biologically exploitable resource, from totality to systematicity. As a corporeal form of life-itself, [5] one of a spectrum of forms of life whose value resides in the presence of a definite number of usable material capacities, man no longer gains his value from his unique ability to synthesize knowledge in order to form a unified picture of totality. By the same token, however, man – in his double role as subject and object – persists. As a technician of life, man intervenes into mobile, manipulable, auto-catalyzing systems. Rather than charting the workings of an elaborate mechanism of which his body and mind are a part, man's species-characteristics come under his protection and control. Under these conditions, the child comes to signify life in its contemporary triplex denotations as soul (the child as transcendent value), as interacting biological processes (the child as unstable auto-affective system), and as germ of life-itself (the child as stem-cell, as protean germ of materiality's potential to give rise to new forms, still bearing the marks of generation).[6] The child-figure thus takes part in both epistemological formations, re-inscribing the face while enclosing behind it the potentialities of life-itself.

In other words, it is not sufficient to renounce or to denounce the child. If we turn our backs, we risk missing that which the child is fitted to capture: the emergent energies

[5] Broadly speaking, "life-itself" responds to the dual injunction to immanence on the one hand and variation on the other. See Rose for an extended discussion.
[6] In a provocative essay, Eugene Thacker defines the three elicitations of life in the contemporary moment as soul, meat and pattern. My version derives from his. See Thacker "Biophilosophy."

of post-humanity.[7] For the same reason, though, our task cannot end with the child, either in celebration or in denunciation. Its nodes describe one pathway through that which it seeks to prevent; its peregrinations describe a part of the machine that will someday cease to sustain it. Throughout this work, I have sought out representations of the child-figure in order to see the woods that compose the child's face. In this chapter, I will move away from direct study of the child as represented in works of fiction to follow the path it charts, to get so close to the face of the child that it fuzzes out and reveals itself as the materials that compose it. The trick is to do so without falling into its ever-receding orbit. By tracing the epistemologies from which the child-figure arises and to which it gives face in the specific form of interpretive methodologies, I hope to puncture the child-figure and to catch its contents on a line of flight away. This chapter will thus follow the child-figure as it fosters the logic of the signifier and its critique in contemporary methods of interpretation in order to get to an interpretive protocol that no longer produces the child's face as the necessary corollary to the post-human.

II

> "'The story will tell,' I took upon myself to reply.
>
> 'Oh I can't wait for the story!
>
> 'The story *won't* tell,' said Douglas; 'not in any literal vulgar way.'"
>
> (James, *Turn* 25)

[7] My use of the term exceeds the more restricted denotation of the posthuman as that which follows from the human as a biological species to indicate the epistemic shift that makes humanism, and with it the necessity of preserving the self-similarity of the human form and the dominance of human culture, insupportable. Indeed, our way of framing the question around categories like species and global ecology already indicates humanism's termination. For elaborations of the term see Rose, *Politics* and Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*.

The relationship between the figure of the child and meaning-based interpretation has been particularly well explored by scholars working in the intersection of queer theory and childhood studies.[8] In *Innocence and Rapture,* Kevin Ohi shows that the structural incoherencies whose tension generates homosexual panic also operate in sex panics around children. First and foremost, he argues, these tensions turn on questions of interpretation. In the homo/hetero bind, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines it, the anxiety that a gesture of homosocial affiliation might be mistaken for one of homosexual identity makes masculinity a pantomime of interpretative negotiation.[9] The anxiety-producing interpretive slip between the most required and the most prohibited of identifications produces a fraught scene of interpretive negotiation whose danger is amplified by the primary prohibition on outwardly recognizing that anything at all is taking place.[10] In similar fashion, Ohi writes, "the child is made to bear the violent disavowals of ambiguities of identity and interpretation" (124) that accrue around the threatening self-similarity of the cute child and the erotic child. The structure of suspicion to which this indistinction gives rise results, in Eric Savoy's evocative phrase, in "the pursuit of highly ambiguous, connotative signs [that] in turn generates a supplementary figurative lexicon" ("Theory *a Tergo"* 246). Since the first rule of homosocial anxiety states, as Sedgwick puts it, that "it takes one to know one" (*Epistemology* 222), the whole drama must be

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[8] Scholars in the field of childhood studies have made a favorite example of the works of Henry James. The over-representation of readings of James's work, and particularly of his 1898 novella *Turn of the Screw,* in this relatively small field would merit a study in its own right. My nonce theory is that James's writing externalizes in the form of critique the connection between hermeneutics and the child-figure whose discovery allows its interpreters to replicate in the form of scholarly criticism the drama of detection his work both critiques *and elicits.* As we will see later, this redundancy is paradigmatic.

[9] See Sedgwick *Epistemology*, especially 9 – 11 and 203 – 205.

[10] The dangers of this scene differ for gay-identified men as well as for straight and gay women. See Sedgwick *Between Men*.

unfolded through allusion, indirection, humor, displacement, reification and generalization.[11]

Ohi's elegant reading of the cute/erotic bind does a fine job of elucidating the structure of contemporary sex panics around children. However, the erotic child constitutes but one face of the figure of the child.[12] Taking off from the same premise as Ohi and Savoy, Ellis Hanson concludes that the child-figure "flirts with us by remaining always erotically overdetermined, always seductively ambiguous, always at play for our inquisitive gaze" ("Knowing" 135). His conclusion suggests that the child not only suffers from the weight of signifying an absolute value, purity, but also that the value of that value resides in its internal violation. If purity denotes an absence of contamination, then its verification will require the introduction of a contaminant. At the very least, examination brings with it the poison of self-consciousness, of a subject who knows herself to be one. But the performance of innocence can always be construed as exactly a performance, e.g., as a sign of self-awareness. As a sign whose innocent relationship with presence is eroded by its internal duplicity, the child compels interpretation. Importantly, Hanson does not make the "inquisitive gaze" the route by which we might spy out the erotic child beneath the garb of innocence, still less because we would like to engage the sexual child in any "literal, vulgar way" (James, *Turn* 25). What, then, accounts for the erotic in "erotically overdetermined" (Hansen 135), the seduction in "seductively

[11] In this way, moralizing advice concerning a child's behavior or dress might easily be construed as lecherous.

[12] The argument Ohi makes is standard in the field. To my mind, no one has convincingly pointed out the equivalent of what Sedgwick terms *the homosocial* for the child-figure, offering instead the incoherencies inherent in the Freudian child's quest for proper adult sexuality. See, for example, Kelleher, "How to Do Things." On the homosocial, see Sedgwick, *Between Men*.

ambiguous" (Hansen 135)? I contend that the child-figure meets so well with the role set out for it by child sex panics because child sex panics and meaning-based interpretations both function as methods for transmitting affect. In both cases, the child's face serves as emblem and circuit.

Recent scholarship on child-sex panics, for example, has with surprising frequency chosen to look at Henry James's 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw* as a source for explicating contemporary discourses of the child. Sheila Teahan's argument that the novel "dramatizes the theme of reading" (350) stands as an explicit convocation of child-sex panic and meaning-based interpretation through the figure of the Governess. The novella relates the story of a young Governess' attempt to read her two child-wards' innocence without questioning them directly. After receiving a tactfully enigmatic letter from the boarding school that the older child attends announcing his dismissal, one whose contents we are not shown, the Governess sets out to discover the nature of the offense. At the beginning, she is motivated to clear them of wrongdoing, but evidence mounts and she soon comes to suspect the children of deceit. Hamstrung by her unwillingness to compromise their innocence in case she has made a mistake, she encircles them with a web of allusions and half-stated accusations. The novella narrates her long and sidelong interrogation and ends when she literally reads the older child to death.

Underscoring the centrality of the interpretive project, James opens the story of the Governess with a frame story about storytelling. In this framing narrative, a group has assembled to outdo each other in frightening tales. The teller of our tale promises that his story will increase his listeners' delight by doubling the number of young children to two from the last story's one. Yet he refuses to say anything more about his tale, to which the

narrator responds that this is truly the source of its delight: the withholding of its proper name, its genre.[13] Horror of nomination plays a central role in the Governess' story as well. To give voice to her feared conclusion would be tantamount to admitting that she was also corrupted. In the final scene, moments before Miles dies, the Governess presses him to state the name they both know she wants to hear. He capitulates and utters the name with his dying breath. But this proper name, the name of the ghost she believes he has been communing with, stands in the place of the name of his crime, which remains safely sealed under its carapace.

Savoy, following Sedgwick, sees the refusal to pronounce the name as an instance of "the connotative lexicon of fin-de-siècle homosexuality" ("Theory *a Tergo*" 273), an efflorescence of euphemism around the figure of the homosexual. For a certain strain of queer theoretical inquiry, those economies of substitution can be reduced to a single, almost clinical, meaning. Even when faced by the child, they function as the glass closet neatly labeled with the term "homosexual."[14] Espying the true name behind the web of substitutes, however, risks reifying it as the only available meaning. More importantly, reducing a circuit to a label has the effect of consolidating its energy into one act of unveiling in a usurpation that takes itself as truth. In other words, if, in Hanson's sense, ambiguity is seductive in itself, then the late 19th century fixation with euphemizing might be seen as a technology for producing sexual tension around the name. This is akin

[13] The relationship between the word and the name in contemporary thought is too long to even begin to reference here. Suffice it to say that there are two main roots: the Saussurian critique of language as a system of names or labels applied to things, of which we will hear more later, and the theological relationship between the engendering, divine word and Adamic naming. On the second strain, see Benjamin, "Task."

[14] This is one of several reasons for the productive cross-fertilization of queer theory and childhood studies, as embodied in Bruhm and Hurley, *Curiouser*.

to arguing, as we will hear later from Roland Barthes, that the structure of the erotic and the structure of the signifier are homologous.

Closer to our purpose, we might reconsider the attempt to reveal the name or to know the full and final meaning of the child as one node in a circuit of arousal, though one with the potential to stop the game. Citing the repetition of verbs like to grasp, to seize, to catch and to fix, Teahan contends that James' novel equates comprehension with capture as a kind of physical seizure of the energy of the circuit. Savoy, in his reading, compares this potentially deadly seizure with the work of the literary critic.[15] He points to James' short story "The Figure in the Carpet" to intimate the exchangeability of child for text and text for sign. Like the Governess with the children, the critics in "The Figure in the Carpet" want to illuminate the text's "formal obscurities to explain what it is really doing, how it is really organized, what it really means" (Savoy, "Theory *a Tergo*" 252). Rather than pursuing the child's secret or the child as secret, they pursue literary meaning, following the text's figural patterning in the hope of seizing on a meaning they feel but cannot name. For this very reason, however, nothing they posit can reveal the true name of the secret. The secret, though ostensibly epistemological, eludes that mode of address. It acts instead as a vector for the transmission of desire, creating acolytes around its occulted presence. The secret manufactures and distributes energy and attention.[16]

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[15] For Savoy's full reading of "The Figure in the Carpet" see Savoy, "Embarrasments." Comparing his reading with Miller's ("Figure") well exemplifies the distance within a shared terrain between readings that begin with the sign in its theological disposition and those that take queer jouissance as the concluding stroke.

[16] In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze refer to this phenomenon as the molecularization of the secret: "This is where the secret reaches its ultimate state: its content is molecularized, it has become molecular, at the same time as its form has been

In both stories, the protagonist-reader and the protagonist-text come to violent ends, the result of an over-enthusiastic application of force to the hermeneutic equivalent of a helium balloon. A depth-model of meaning perilously ignores the necessity of surface tension for the balloon's continued bounce. A balloon has no inside to penetrate; the inside maintains the outside and vice versa. It is, rather, a threshold between two milieus. As Savoy explains, the self-concealing text's extravagant display of hermeneutic modesty produces the appearance of a secret. That it has a secret, in other words, is the content of its secret. Structurally, then, it is bound to produce the hermeneutics of suspicion that will be its end. It invites and repels detection in the same movement. Savoy puts the problem this way:

> The governess's spiral of hermeneutic connotation is restrained when it comes too close to nomination; because nomination is simultaneously unbearable and unknowable, it is arrested by aposiopesis, the gap in explanatory syntax in which, as we have seen, the prosopopoeic figure of the ghost is generated. (270)

Aposiopesis, the name for abruptly ended sentences and ascetic refusals of knowledge, produces prosopopoesis, or, literally, the giving of a face, like the skin of a balloon or the occluded face of the suffering child, so that it may repeat the discovery of the absence at the center. Without the promise of revelation, of course, there can be no absence. Thus what it finds, over and over again, is what Savoy calls "the gap in explanatory syntax" (270) or the inner emptiness of the balloon mystified as the impenetrable stadium of the

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dismantled, becomes a pure moving line – in the sense in which it can be said a given line is the 'secret' of a painter, or a given rhythmic cell, a given sound molecule (which does not constitute a theme or form) the 'secret' of a musician" (290). In their discussion of the works of James, they call this "the becoming-child of the secret" (290).

secret. The child figures, incites and justifies this elaborate energetic relay. Seen in this light, meaning-based interpretation is not a way of eliciting knowledge but an art practiced in the service of feeling.[17]

III

> "The whole curiosity of our thought now resides in the question: What is language, how can we find a way round it in order to make it appear in itself, in all its plenitude?" (Foucault, *Order* 306)

Under the rules of formation characteristic of the retreating episteme, meaning and language became nearly synonymous. Significantly, their overlay had little to do with the communicative function of language. Instead, language was sought for itself. In symmetrical fashion, meaning extended beyond the limits of any denotation to designate a quality or state of being. Yet the jointure of the adjectival sense of meaning to the opacity of language failed to check the imperative of the secret. Instead their crossing engendered language as a form of being. Thus the language Foucault finds us so insistently soliciting in the above passage is 1) a form of being rather than a vehicle for representation 2) occluded 3) a plenitude and 4) penetrable by way of its rear entrance, behind the false front of content. In summary, then, language not only exceeds that which it represents, but also exceeds its role as carrier of representation. If it is meaningful, it meaning stands to the side of the knowledge that it conveys in any local instance. Meaning emanates from what Foucault, channeling Stéphane Mallarmé, calls "the word

[17] As in homosocial panic, however, the affective itinerary of the child-figure in this context requires the disavowal of all but the epistemological content. Though as a discursive technology the child-figure captures and controls the circulation of energy, several of the formations I discuss here and below contribute to its construction by playing the meaning game.

itself – not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious being," which "in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness" forms a "density" (305). Meaning names this density.

Foucault proposes that contemporary thought originated in the meeting of the knowledge of being and the being of language, or between the question he attributes to Friedrich Nietzsche – "Who is speaking?" (305) – and the answer he gleans from Mallarmé: naught but language. The answer Foucault derives from Mallarmé grafts together two approaches whose opposed conceptions of the sign engender a profound schism in the descent of contemporary methodology. Taken as the linguistic construction of value, Mallarmé's answer gives rise to a theory of knowledge; taken as an affirmation of the substantial being of language, it develops into a procedure for soliciting feeling, specifically in order to apprehend the vibrations of being. Their meeting forms a vertex, one line of which aims toward a description of the historical permutations of subject-formation through the analysis of discourse, Foucault's own path, while the other rockets away from knowledge toward meaning. We have just been witness to one instance of the dissimulation of the quest for meaning in the demand for knowledge, epistemic detection retooled as a machine for producing feeling. As this implies, though they won't cross, they enclose an overlapping territory in which either might be method or object for the other.[18] Indeed, the final section of *The Order of Things*, from which I have been quoting, might be characterized as the application of discourse analysis toward an understanding of the arrangement of power and knowledge that gave rise to the conception of the being

[18] Below, we will track Sedgwick's contention that contemporary theory mistakes meaning-affects for knowledge-production, particularly passionately argued in her "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading" in Sedgwick, *Touching*.

of language.

Knowledge as a relation of force and language as the dense vibrations of being became conceivable together at the threshold of the taxonomic projects of the last episteme, "when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things" (304). Though this shared genesis accounts for the prominence of language in both lines of thought, it is as a consequence of the endeavor to solicit language's occult plenitude that the present-absent binary came to dominate our thinking about the sign. And it is by way of the absent sign and the logic of metonymy it makes sensible that the face of the child comes to figure the possibility of meaningfulness divorced from any positive content.[19]

Jacques Derrida's work might be summarized as a consistent application of pressure on the fault-lines of this version of the sign to elicit germinal life from its hierarchical regimentation.[20] Under the arrangement that Derrida calls the classical understanding of the sign, language marks the former presence of the real thing to which it refers and for which it acts as substitute.[21] As a species of "deferred presence" ("Différance" 391), the sign must bear some trace of the presence whose absence it records. In this way, a signature attests to the former presence of the signatory; a witness

[19] The prominence of the sign in the story of contemporary theory, related in massive tomes like Rivkin and Ryan's *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, makes the sign's permutations well known to most literary scholars. I retell it here to point out the twinning of knowledge and meaning.

[20] I have found Barry Stocker's anthology of Derrida's writing a fine introduction to his work, though the introductory essays place Derrida in the context of philosophy rather than literary theory and thus tell an interestingly divergent story from the one I am relating here. See Stocker, *Jacques Derrida*.

[21] Despite the chronology implicit in the term "classical understanding" (which I borrow from Derrida), this idea of the sign has much credence today, especially in judicial contexts.

account refers to actions the speaker, but not the jury, observed; a photograph records the existence of a person, place or thing. This juridical understanding of the sign takes its validating reference from the past and offers its trace as evidence: the hand that scripted the sign, the memory of the event, or the light reflected from objects and captured on paper. Except for its recording function, the sign should have nothing of its own.

To function properly, however, the sign must expose some of its density. As Derrida writes, the sign "defers the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, have a present intuition of it" (391) in favor of extending its range and transmissibility. The sign mediates the encounter it enables between the real but absent referent and the present actants. But by mediating that encounter it introduces the possibility of error, forgery, manipulation and, what is worse, a gap between knowledge and experience. Its fitness for the role of substitute insinuates that the hierarchical binary whose order it is supposed to uphold might be artificial. The sign is thus duplicitous, introducing a necessary but fatal third term into the sign/referent dyad. It is only in the light of the return to full presence, "the final and missing presence" (391) as Derrida puts it, that the sign is saved from this quagmire. One name for the cost of this redemption is history, the lived temporal gap between presences because of which "the present becomes the sign of signs, the trace of traces. It is no longer what every reference refers to in the last instances; it becomes a function in a generalized referential structure" (Derrida, "Différance" 403). This is the sign in its theological disposition and its sign is the child who cuts a shadow across the ever-receding horizon. I call the duplicitous sign theological because its internal schism generates faith in the existence of a final meaning. Rather than rejecting the sign

altogether, Derrida famously found in the theological sign the generosity of the aporatic as the first principle of a secular ontology. To that end, he exacerbated the rifts in the theological sign beyond the grounding capacity of any final meaning.

Derrida's revision of the sign/referent binary strategically maintains the energetic circuit of the sign-secret but opens fissures in its course. Methods derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics secularize the sign by severing its relationship with meaning, and thus its affectivity, altogether. In Saussurian linguistics, the referent is irrelevant to the operations of the linguistic system; it is replaced by the signified, or the concept. In his system, the sign is "a two-sided psychological entity" (Saussure, "Selections" 78) composed of a standard set of sounds and notations – a word, in other words, in its aural and graphic forms – and attached to a wholly internal, psychological, concept. The sign gets its meaning from its contiguity with and difference from other signs rather than from its ties to a real referent. Meanings, in other words, are constituted by the arbitrary distinctions of an ordering system, e.g., language in the abstract and languages in their plurality, rather than from the binding force of a real referent with self-apparent meaning. The sign, far from standing in the place of thing, occupies a wholly different material register.

For Saussure, words correspond to ideas, not to external referents. For Sigmund Freud, the topographic features of the unconscious emerge through language's figural repertoire of condensation, displacement, repetition and pattern. Though not homologous, the overlay of Saussurian linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis highlights the linguistic disposition of the human subject and of the human *as* subject *to* a language divorced from external verifiability. What Saussurian linguistics adds to Freudian psychoanalysis is the

systemic closure that allows for words to be treated not as representations of thoughts but as figures of an intractable and hidden subjectivity. In other words, they make the subject kin to the text. This is the sign in its psychoanalytic disposition.

Despite the textualization of subjectivity, as long as the sign continues to reference an external, verifiable event, as it does in orthodox Freudianism, it retains its older denotation as substitute. It stands in for a past event and allows for the pursuit and capture of the final meaning. An interpretation, then, is complete when it finds and connects a text's hidden meanings and in so doing renders a symptomatic text diagnosable. Freudo-Saussurianism indexes the truth-claims of signs to past events in a person's life and the reflection of those events in the neurotic-linguistic allegories produced by the unconscious. It eradicates the theological problem of the sign's density by grounding it in psychological truths. Such truths come with particular regularity from the topos of childhood. Indeed, in many ways, the Freudian child is synonymous with the child as a figure for and of the secret. At the level of content, the Oedipalization of the child happens through the child's assumption of the secret as secret, too terrible to consciously know.[22] The assumption of the secret, whether it is called castration anxiety or the name-of-the-father, shifts an energetic relay from one triangle (the polymorphous perversity of the family romance) to another (whose prolongation into the future makes the triangle obtuse).[23] In other ways, however, Freud's child is analogous to the Governess in his relentless detection of the secrets of adulthood.[24] For all of the

[22] See Freud, "Dissolution."
[23] The Oedipal triangle also corresponds to the face: two eyes and a mouth. On castration anxiety, see Freud, "Dissolution." On the "Name-of-the-Father," see Lacan, *Ecrits*, especially 192-199.
[24] For a stark example, see the case of little Hans in Freud 1963.

operations that have been performed to open the wayward paths of the Freudian corpus for further investigation, the epistemological orientation of his writings remains.[25]

Foucault's version of Nietzsche's question "Who is speaking?" (Foucault, *Order* 305) recapitulates Freud's revision of the subject in combination with Saussure's revision of sign-theory to invert the order of priority between the world and its representation in signs, narratives, treatises, pictorial representations and the like. If the sign-system has no inherent relationship with the plane of reference but only with how we conceptualize that plane, and if our actions in the world are mediated not by our encounter with the world but by our pre-existing semiotically-engendered conceptualizations of it, then representations precede and condition the real. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault emphatically rejects both the mysticism of the sign as the chalice of meaning and the pursuit of the referent.[26] First, he distances the methodology he advocates from naïve scholarship that assumes that writing can generate unitary meanings and perspectives and give untroubled access to things in their plenitude:

> In the descriptions for which I have attempted to provide a theory, there can be no question of interpreting discourse with a view to writing a history of the referent. (47)

He recognizes, too, the danger of the Freudian model of the sign, which looks to discourse as to a text that conceals a hidden truth:

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[25] Even when Freud tackles broader social questions, he does so by universalizing the mechanisms he attributes to human psychology. Leo Bersani, whose work I will reference below, does a wonderful job demonstrating what he calls the "oceanic feeling" (*Freudian* 15) of Freud's writing. That Freud wants to produce a truthful discourse of the unconscious but finds bifurcations riling every theory gives our Freudian-inflected habits of thought a highly productive example of différance.

[26] Secondary work on Foucault can be uneven. See Deleuze, *Foucault,* for a work whose value far exceeds its still-wonderful explication.

> What we are concerned with here is not to neutralize discourse, to make it the sign of something else, and to pierce through its density in order to reach what remains silently anterior to it. (47)

Like Freud, Foucault pays strict attention to the rules that govern discourse, its repetitions and anomalies, synchronic co-occurrences and diachronic modification, what it makes sensible and what statement formations remain necessarily obscure. Rather than addressing this pattern as the allegorical face of a real referent, Foucault wants to observe discourse in the dignity of its own distribution and "to maintain it in its consistency, to make it emerge in its own complexity" (47) precisely because the sign and things materialize together:

> What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with "things." To "depresentify" them…. To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of "things" anterior to discourse the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. (47)

The referent returns. Neutered of its priority and disabused of its claims to pre-discursive existence, the referent circles back around as product. This is the sign in its performative disposition. For a long while in the practice of criticism in the humanities, this process was known as denaturalization where to denaturalize meant to reverse the order of priority between sign and referent.

In practice, discourse analysis is a method of knowledge-production that applies particularly well to the analysis of intellectual and cultural history. Its methodology, however, opens onto a radically de-theologized ontology. Both modalities avert the structure of the secret. Gilles Deleuze, in his book-length reading of Foucault's work,

amplifies this aspect of Foucault's corpus. In particular, he reminds us of the way Foucault levels both sign and referent by making them both immanent. Nothing resides underneath the sign because "no statement can have a latent existence, since it shows what in fact is said; even the blanks or gaps it contains must not be confused with hidden meanings" (*Foucault* 15). A whole ontology may be unfolded from this flattening out of the vertical relationship between sign and referent, representation and truth. Rather than searching for universal and ahistorical underlying truths, post-structural ontology asserts "no support […] and no depth to be had for this bottomless chessboard where being is set in play" (Derrida, "Différance" 402). Being is not composed of convergent structures around which the beings of this world take shape, but of systems that materialize beings through the ever-shifting play of discursive formations. A discursive formation modulates the meanings of individual statements. Thus, Foucault's discussion of children in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1,* locates the scrutiny of children's development beginning in the 19th century within the broader milieu of its enactment. He writes:

> The child's "vice" was not so much an enemy as a support; it may have been designated as the evil to be eliminated, but the extraordinary effort that went into the task that was bound to fail leads one to suspect that what was demanded of it was to persevere, to proliferate to the limits of the visible and invisible, rather than to disappear for good. (42)

To answer the challenge implicit in Nietzsche's questions, post-structuralism regards language as in excess of its representational faculty. But by pursuing language's plenitude, post-structuralism opens onto a total plenitude that envelops language and drains it of its unique capacity to engender.

IV

"Here are a few things theory knows today." (Sedgwick and Frank, *Shame* 1)

In its fullest elaboration, post-structuralism levels matter and language by refusing to ascribe priority and activity to one, posteriority and passivity to the other. It has no truck with meaning-based interpretations and their affective relays. Indeed, the above passage takes the fin-de-siècle fascination with children, women, homosexuals and the insane, as a game played with energy, attention, and arousal:

> "Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement: parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played *this game* continually since the 19th century" (emphasis mine Foucault, *History* 45).

Unlike James and his critics, however, Foucault's text resists becoming a node in that energetic circuit.

In three trenchant methodological essays – "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading: Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: On Reading Silvan Tomkins" and the "Introduction" to *Touching Feeling* – however, Sedgwick demonstrates that in its widest circulation, discourse analysis can take as its primary evidentiary vehicle the unacknowledged circulation of a limited palette of critical emotions. Her essays have influentially conjoined disaffection with language-based analyses to renewed attention to and interest in theories of human emotion. She does so by pointing out the investments post-structuralism already has in producing certain types of emotions as if emotions were

indistinguishable not only from evidence but also from action. Having established the energetic-emotional foundation of what she calls "contemporary theory" ("Introduction" 1), she proposes that we recognize and embrace the role of affect in our methodologies and in our theories of subjectivity. While she persuasively argues for an ethics of critical affects, our interest resides in the crossing of meaning- and knowledge-based inquiries and in her definition of affect.[27]

She lodges three main charges against theory. First, she argues that it puts too much faith in the formulas that guide its methods. She takes particular umbrage at the critical theoretical axiom that states that the exposure of oppressive beliefs or conditions is tantamount to their alleviation, which has roots in the Frankfurt school conception of culture as false consciousness and of scholars as revolutionaries, as well as in the Foucauldian return of the referent as product. Second, then, Sedgwick excoriates what she sees as the resulting evacuation of individual agency, local experience and idiosyncratic differences between people in favor of universalizing explanations and standardized subject positions. In the introduction to her earlier *Epistemology of the Closet*, which foreshadows many of the issues she raises in these three pieces, the first axiom she lists is "People are different from each other" (22). She holds that the effect of homogenizing subjectivity along a standardized grid (race, class, gender, sexuality, locality, ethnicity, citizenship, say) is to likewise standardize the results of critical inquiry and so argues that the homogenization of persons as subjects and the faith in the curative powers of interpretation reduce scholarship to a judgment of the moral worth of a text along the binary axis repressive/libratory. Finally, she contends that though critical theory

[27] For a brief overview of contemporary affect theory, see Smith, "Review".

takes its lineage from Foucault, it ignores his basic argument that prohibition and liberation form a closed self-perpetuating system. “Attempts to step aside from the repressive hypothesis,” Sedgwick writes, “based on the continuing study of its protean inclusivity, form an insoluble loop of positive feedback” (*Touching* 12). Embroiled in an adversarial relationship with texts, criticism seems most truthful when it is outraged, self-righteous or grimly satisfied.

We can see this at work in James R. Kincaid’s declaration that the child-figure has been produced “in our cultural factories, the ones that make meanings for us” (“Producing” 9). Kincaid’s “cultural factories” are literal and specifiable; they are the text and the screen, the newspaper article and the advice column, the advertisement and the design of the mall that houses it, children’s fashion and the quotidian attribution of natural and necessary characteristics to all children. Within the terms of Foucauldian-inspired social constructionism, which borrows from psychoanalysis the sense of a cultural psyche unaware of its own motivations and tactics, the more vehement the objections to the procedure of denaturalization, the more likely will scholarship uncover instances of historical and cultural difference to evidence the social construction of the apparent naturality of the allegedly natural.

In other words, the distinction between Kincaid’s sense of the cultural factory as a place where meaning gets circulated through specific, repeated images and statements and Foucault’s sense of discourse as “the rules of formation” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 425) that govern the truth-claims of a given field exceeds the difference between Kincaid’s cultural and Foucault’s intellectual domains of inquiry. The intuitive ease of Kincaid’s analogy comes from the way it reinvests power in a single institution with

definite boundaries: cultural factories may make oppressive meanings, but we can always choose not to buy from them. The kinds of questions one can pose in response to this sort of reductive application of discourse analysis concern the kinds of revolutionary actions that might be equivalent to the refusal to purchase the values and meanings produced by the factory. Broadly mandated as the truth whose disclosure forms the legitimacy of criticism, the resulting "binarized, highly moralistic allegories of the subversive versus the hegemonic, resistance versus power" (Sedgwick and Frank 16) make it more difficult "to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower or teller" (Sedgwick, *Touching* 124) including the discursive formation within which that utterance gains its sense. Such is the case with Kincaid's description of the child-figure as a sort of empty sack that carries

> for us things we somehow cannot carry for ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasure so great we would not, without the child, know how to contain them. People, we know, sometimes beat children because the child can be filled up with whatever must be beaten. (*Child-Loving* 79)

The child is filled up with our meanings, which come first. The figure emerges afterward as prosthesis. It is secondary. Our pleasure and anxieties inform the child's construction but there the causality ends. As the last line of the quotation above suggests, the problem with our figurations of the child for Kincaid does not reside in the anxieties themselves or with the unnaturalness of our child-figures but with their effect on real children and the kinds of lives for which nature intended them. Real children, filled up with the meanings

carried by their spectral doubles, may be switched metonymically for the content of those images. Suddenly, then, the referent has returned in its original form as ultimate carrier of meaning. The sign in its performative disposition constitutes the webs of association and causalities that are constitutive of the real; yet, for this reason, "the utterances in question are closest to claiming a simply descriptive relation to some freestanding, ostensibly extradiscursive reality" (Sedgwick, *Touching* 5). When this statement holds true for utterances under the critic's gaze, when a critic uncovers a descriptive statement's performative effect, then the work can be called anti-essentialist or social constructionist. However, the critic's statements find their justification in the presumed existence of actual people for whom the statements describe reality rather than perform its enactment. Antiessentialist projects, then, are constantly in danger of hitching the legitimacy of their work to that most generalizing category: *things everyone knows*. And yet, Sedgwick insists, we reveal them as if they were great discoveries. The meat of her argument against social construction resides in this impoverishing and self-concealing circularity.

In revising the consensus understanding in literary studies of the relationship between world and word, text and reader, Sedgwick begins again at the causes of human behavior, but she begins this time with Silvan Tomkins, a mid-century American academician whose massive life-work *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* Sedgwick collected and published with Adam Frank. Tomkins' model of human psychology grafts an affect system between drives (e.g., all those behaviors that respond to basic physiological needs) and cognitions as another innate, neuro-cognitive inheritance. A stimulus, which may be any object or any affect, triggers neurons to fire. The duration of their activation corresponds to one of eight emotional spectra: interest-excitement,

enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, anger-rage and fear-terror (74). Sedgwick and Frank find congenial the way this "many-valued" model (10) of the self trades the evaluative purity of social-constructionist interpretations for subtle and accurate descriptive power.[28] Though the terms here seem somehow softer than the identity-grid categories we saw before, Sedgwick and Frank's application of them generates a surprisingly anti-humanist account of perception:

> [The reaction to the stimulus] already itself reflects the complex interleaving of endogenous and exogenous, perceptual, proprioceptive, and interpretive – causes, effects, feedbacks, motives, long-term states such as moods and theories, along with distinct transitory physical and verbal events. (11)

Much in this description draws from Foucault's contention that there is no place outside of discourse and no time before interpretation: moods are both cultural and biological; stimulus and response feedback on each other; reactions are the body's own interpretative methodology. This understanding leaves no doubt of the complex engagement between matters and discourses, cultures and natures at stake in any description of human behavior. Sedgwick describes her project, therefore, as a deprecation of "the assignment of a very special value, mystique, or thingness to meaning and language" (*Touching* 6) in favor of attention to the pleasure and nourishment of things like "the brush-brush of corduroy trousers or the crunch of extra-crispy chicken" (15). To feel the texture of cord or of fried chicken, Sedgwick writes, "is always, immediately and de facto to be

[28] Getting at the neurological and cognitive effects of reading on perception has become the terrain of cognitive approaches to literature and other mixtures of scientific praxis with literary theory. See, for example, Massey.

immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesizing, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time" (13). Texture provides Sedgwick with an intuitive heuristic for the kinds of inquiry disenabled by critical hermeneutics.

I have already indicated my position that attention to language does not take itself as a critical hermeneutics except insofar as critical hermeneutics designates a technology for the production of arousal. Putting that aside, it is still not at all clear what literary studies might look like given this understanding of the subject. Moreover, as a mandate for literary study, her bid to trade subjectivity for innate characteristics entails either dispensing altogether with our ability to conjecture about the effect of culture or leaving social constructionism intact as a separate endeavor. For instance, there is no reason why we shouldn't be able to combine the eight affective spectra with the identity grid of abstract personhood. In so doing, we might argue that our eight emotional possibilities would be shaped by the regularity with which we are called upon to feel any combination of them, just as more frequently exercised muscles bulge while others atrophy. A certain point on the identity-grid would then correspond to a certain typical frequency of emotive experience, and thus to a certain regularity and stability of those emotional states. This analysis would be coherent within the bounds of Sedgwick's new paradigm except insofar as her turn to Tomkins was explicitly supposed to disqualify it. The first axiom, remember, is that people are different from each other. To this we must now add the counter-intuitive claim that they are different *because* they are the same: they have the same affective assembly.

We might say, then, that difference arises from the freedom of the affect system to

couple with any object or any affect. To assert this freedom, though, introduces an even greater difficulty for literary theory: the universality-particularity problem. Emotions are innate and universal; combinatory possibilities, particular. In this paradigm, it is difficult to show why certain emotions should so regularly appear in tandem with certain practices but only in highly restricted places and periods, such as homosocial anxiety in the late 19th century in Anglo-American contexts. The modular freedom of the "may" ("any affect may have any object" [*Shame* 7]) retreats so far away from the evaluative mandate of the social constructionist consensus that it becomes curiously limited in what it can claim about those combinations. If we were feeling particularly snide we might rewrite the list of possible pleasures that Sedgwick and Frank lift from Tomkins' writing and approvingly liken to the writing of Gertrude Stein – "If you like to be looked at and I like to look at you, we may achieve an enjoyable interpersonal relationship. If you like to talk and I like to listen to you talk, this can be mutually rewarding. If you like to feel enclosed within a claustrum and I like to put my arms around you, we can both enjoy a particular kind of embrace" (3) – around a less appealing topic in order to show the utter withdrawal of explanatory function from the critical scene.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the figure of the child lends its sentimental economy to Sedgwick and Frank's argumentation, smoothing over the possibility of other content with the affective resonance of identification. We have already seen Sedgwick and Frank celebrate Tomkins' writing for the nourishment it provides. "This rich claustral writing," they write, "nurtures, pacifies, replenishes, then sets the idea in motion again" (3). This positions the idea as a child held by the writing; it is the perspective of childhood as

embedded in the planar relations of the "beside" that Sedgwick finds lacking in contemporary theory. "As any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings," she writes,

> *beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (*Touching* 8)

What can this thoroughly individualist accounting of personhood say about the impact of culture? More dramatically, what can it tell us about the positing procedures of literary criticism? If representations like texts constitute another kind of stimulus for the affect system, then each reader should be – nay, can only be – the authority over his or her reading experience. At the same time, however, the analogy between the trigger and the affective response guarantees that we will all have the same original reaction: terror, for instance, at a horror movie even if the affect of terror couples for us with the affect spectrum joy-enjoyment (If I enjoy being frightened…). As Tomkins explains, our "internal neural correlates" will generate analogs of the trigger-event:

> Just as a pistol shot [and the internal neural firing that corresponds to it] is a stimulus which is very sudden in onset, very brief in duration, and equally sudden in decay, so its amplifying affective analog, the startle response, *mimics* the pistol shot by being equally sudden in onset, brief in duration, and equally sudden in decay. (emphasis his, qtd in Ngai 53-54)

The net effect on literary methods, the revision of which is Sedgwick's avowed purpose in touting Tomkins, is at best a return to reader response theory and at worst an untheorized but theoretically justified resurgence of representationalism in the garb of aesthetic experience.

V

> "Queerness names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism." (Edelman, *No Future* 3)

Sedgwick's path through the pitfalls of social constructionism privileges the self-evident correspondence between content and emotion, much as social constructionism itself did at the level of epistemology. The legacy of the Saussarian divorce of signification from reference includes another school of queer theorists for whom severing the cord that bound the referent to its sign introduced a new absence, a new and interminable lack, premised on the inaccessibility of the ontologically real. If we are constituted by language, then our every experience will be mediated by the encounter with the signifier. The theological disposition of the sign – its promise of renewed meaning in the future – thus adheres to its material instantiation: the ever-receding referent, construed as the body, from which the Saussurian signifier takes flight. By embracing lack and abstaining from the seductions of the sign, Lacanian queer theorists align themselves with the density of the word and its contentless meaning-affect.

In "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," Jacques Lacan posits a central algorithm to describe the functioning of language: S/s or "the signifier over the signified, 'over' corresponding to the bar separating the two stages" (149).[29] This originary bar then spools out as a barbed wire on the level of the signifier since "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification"

[29] The secondary literature on Lacan rivals James's. There are many good, accessible overviews on his body of work as well as more trenchant or hagiographic analyses. For the first, I prefer the graphic layout found in *Lacan for Beginners*; for the second, Gallop, *Daughter's* is wonderful.

(150). The bar that denies access to the signified might as well be shaped like a line of signifiers under which the signified slides (152). For as much as the bar denies access to the signified, it likewise denies access to the signifiers in their individuality (the [singular] "word itself" in Foucault's formulation [*Order* 305]) because "no matter where one starts to designate their reciprocal encroachments and increasing inclusions, these units are subjected to the double condition of being reducible to ultimate differential elements" (Lacan, *Ecrits* 152). The resulting horizontality of the signifying chain mimics the child's spatialized relation to his specular image in Lacan's analysis of the mirror stage. The child "sunk in his motor incapacity" (2) finds in the mirror an image that allows him to feel himself as a single, whole image but only through the investment of energy into a displaced identification. The mirror image, in its illusion of solidity, compensates for his actual experience of his body and thus becomes the unreal real – the imaginary, the "fictional" (2) – toward which he strives. Lacan's child-figure offers no respite from lack: prior to his ascension to the symbolic matrix, he suffers under the indignities of his physiological immaturity; after the assumption of the image, he finds himself forever propelled toward distant identifications that nonetheless appear to bear his name. Yet in straddling these two inadequacies, Lacan's child marks the graft of the symbolic and the subject and so indicates their point of rupture.

Hopscotching between signifiers moves us toward an ever-receding future. The signifying chain has no necessary end, only interruptions. As Lacan notes, however, there is in every signifier, indeed in every letter, a singularity: "the material support that concrete discourse borrows from language" (147). Unlike the signifier, the body of the letter is asignificant, of a different order from that of any one meaning. In its

meaninglessness it is equally inaccessible. Nonetheless, it is as the body of the letter that Edelman sees the queer inhering in the gap in signification that subtends the illusion of meaningfulness. The queer names "the antithetical grounding, whereby the structure of Symbolic reality rests on what also serves to negate it" (*No Future* 36). Rather than relentlessly pursuing the final signifier, whose discovery "will make meaning whole at last" (37), Edelman advocates "reducing every signifier to the status [of the gap] and insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense" (37). Queer, then, names the process by which signification collapses on itself, the abyss into which it collapses and the experience of jouissance that accompanies that seismic event. Whereas Sedgwick calls upon feelings like anxiety to explain an epistemological problem, queer jouissance feels through and because of the retreat of meaning.

Edelman's emphasis on *access to* jouissance underscores the paradoxical fullness of lack. Losing meaning releases and allows access to a state of overwhelming bodily agitation; therefore, lack is paradoxically fuller than full meaning precisely because meaning's promise of future amplitude demands present renunciation. Although Edelman follows Lacan in locating this effect in what he calls the letter's "cadaverous materiality" (7), Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, extends that distinction to encompass narrative. Recapitulating the knowledge/meaning binary, Barthes distinguishes between the text of pleasure, which he associates with narrative action and with the Oedipal desire "to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end" (10) and the text of bliss, which he describes as "a powerful gush of words"(7) that "seizes the subject" (7) and acts on him as does the rope on "Sade's libertine when he manages to be hanged and then to cut the rope at the very moment of his orgasm, his bliss" (7). Barthes' comparison to de Sade's

libertine gives a second level of resonance to the signifying gap. The rope that hangs the libertine opens a chasm between long and unthreatened durations of mastery. The text of bliss grips the reader rather than leading him on, overwhelms him with verbal sensation rather than tantalizing him with promised satisfaction, and ultimately causes him to lose his grip on the epistemological grids that bind him, but only momentarily and only in sequence with the text of pleasure.

In *The Freudian Body*, Leo Bersani draws much the same conclusion about the co-constitution of signification and catachresis. By working with essays by Freud, Bersani shows how explicitly epistemological enterprises like psychoanalysis likewise produce jouissance. In the following passage, Bersani redefines interpretation as itself a kind of affective itinerary:

> The relevance of psychoanalysis to literature has nothing to do with the discovery of the literary work's secret content. […] That relevance is to be sought in a certain relation between meaning and movement in discourse. […] Writing may begin to operate as the activity we call literature when, by a particular kind of replicative insistence […] it erodes its own statement and thereby blocks interpretation. (11)

In each of these instances, what Barthes calls "the site of a loss" (*Pleasure* 7) corresponds to a specific loss, the loss of the knowing, self-constituting, rational subject in the abyss opened by the movement of the signifier. The logic of the signifier, however, not only makes up the subject of this school of thought, it also informs the shape of its transformations. Hence, in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Bersani adds the last link to the metonymic chain whose articulations we have been following. Where in *The Freudian*

Body, Bersani looks at how theoretical argumentation collapses around the gaps in the signifying chain, in "Rectum" he discusses sex as a bodily practice that produces the "*jouissance* of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is 'pressed' beyond a certain threshold of endurance" (218). The body at its limits performs, like the text pressed to its limits by a reader or like the gushing sentences of the text of bliss, the momentary effacement of the face of the subject. The effacement of the subject redoubles in reverse the infant's joy at his ascension to symbolic mastery.

The shattered face, like the occluded face of the child, stands between, as Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze write, "two axes, signifiance and subjectification" (*Thousand* 167). The chain of analogies has taken us from the face of the child to the theological sign to the cadaverous materiality of the letter to the text of bliss and finally to the body. Through the pattern enacted by the structure of the secret, the oppositional positions of the child and the queer, the signifier and the body, lack and fullness, collapse. The child, the guarantor of future meaning, instead disappears over the horizon, forcing us to give chase like the bumbling literary critics in James's story. Meanwhile, the gap or abyss between signifiers turns out to be so full as to induce erotic paroxysms in its contemplators and interpreters. Finally, then, the child's deferral and the punctuating drop between signifiers reveal themselves as furnishings of the same scene: a game of hopscotch perhaps whose plane of advance must be navigated by a kind of one-legged hopping from square to square. In each instance above, the insistent separation, the hygienic cordon erected between the child and the queer, futurity and negativity, knowledge and meaning, was key to the structure of the argument. In each case, however,

the two faces merge to form the same system: a face composed of white walls and black holes:

> Earlier, we encountered two axes, signifiance and subjectification. We saw that they were two very different semiotic systems, or even two strata. Signifiance is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies. Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passions, and redundancies. Since all semiotics are mixed and strata come at least in two, it should come as no surprise that a very special mechanism is situated at their intersection. Oddly enough, it is a face: the *white wall / black hole* system. (167)

"The face is a politics" (181). It belongs to no one. Or, rather, it is a machine, an "abstract machine that produces faces according to the changeable combinations of its cogwheels" (168). Thus, the face is a redundancy. It is both the concrete face and the machine that stencils that face. As Deleuze and Guattari warn: "Do not expect the abstract machine to resemble what is produces, or will produce" (168). It may appear horizontal, like a plane or a landscape. In such a shape, we might labor along the vertices that point out to the future through the hopscotch pattern of the signifying chain or seek the precipitous drops of the black holes between the squares without ever realizing their adjacency. They might even appear as antagonists. But like de Sade's libertine regaining mastery at the moment of dissolution, the black hole adjoins the white planes to make up its field of action. Just as the promise of future meaning generates deferral as its waste product, the critique of the signifier, such as I have briefly sketched here, cannot be conjoined to the reification of the subject's dissolution without rounding the bend of the

Möbius strip and arching back into the signifier. Together the white wall of future meaning and the black hole of meaningless jouissance form the planes of the child's face as a technology that circulates meaning as meaning-affect.

The face circulates energy through meaning as its unnameable content, but it does so as a capture. As Jamie Skye Bianco explains, "Control thresholds or captures the emergent to achieve a modular stability" (Bianco, "Techno-Cinema" 402n16). The circulation of the shape of the face, or the hopscotch logic of the signifying chain, directs and contains their dynamism within the white wall/black hole system, that is, as "the social production of face …the facialization of the entire body and all its surroundings and object, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieus" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 181). Such subjectification *results from* the production, dissemination, capture and directed enclosure of energy around an affective itinerary. Or, in other words, "as an attractor" that reaches across "variegated spatial and temporal domains" (Bianco, "Techno-Cinema" 318) like the page, the screen, the eye, the heart, the skin, the family, to shape their energies as a face. The face, then, is not static. It is not the opposite of affect. It is a form of affect's capture, and a highly intensive one at that because it circles through so few points. Really look at it and it will reveal its dynamism:

> *The face, what a horror*. It is naturally a lunar landscape, with its pores, planes, matts, bright colors, whiteness, and holes: there is no need for a close-up to make it inhuman; it is naturally a close-up, and naturally inhuman, a monstrous hood. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 190)

In each of the stations we have visited in the unfolding of the theological sign and its critique, the child-figure's appearance signaled the tangency of epistemological and

affective itineraries. In some instances, the child figured the graft between the white walls and the black holes of the faciality machine. In others, the child covered over the adjacency of the walls and holes by performing as a heuristic for producing knowledge about subjectification. The territory composed of black holes and white walls arcs out from their point of contact; the unacknowledged production of meaning-affect in knowledge-regimes and the ostensible desire for knowledge in meaning-quests binds the two to each other and to the face of the child. That point of contact is affect.

VI

> "Before language means anything, it is visual, aural, and or tactile. Before language means anything it is material. […] Before language means anything it is sensation. Before language means anything it is affect. After language means something it is affect. While language means it is affect." (Bianco, "Affective" 4)

Meaning is not one of the eight affective spectra Sedgwick gleans from Tomkins. Indeed, it bears little resemblance to them. However, it does share some qualities with the way Sedgwick described her use of affect in the introduction to *Between Men*, one of her early works and a founding text in the field of queer theory. Sedgwick explains her use of affect in the analysis of homosociality:

> For the most part, I will be using "desire" in a way analogous to the psychoanalytic use of "libido" – not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship. (*Between* 2)

In this early passage, Sedgwick sees discourse riding on a substrate of affect, which acts as a solidifying agent, the glue that cements ways of knowing via repertories of feeling to modes of being. She acknowledges that affect may differentiate into defined emotional states, but she argues that those differences are far less relevant than the structures they maintain; in this case the myriad ways homophobia solicits the attentions of its objects. That energy creates intimacy no matter the content of that energy clears the ground for insights not otherwise possible, but it does so as a structural argument whose power to decipher patterns within ostensibly opposed formations is purchased at the cost of specificity. *Between Men*, as a structural argument, levels different kinds of social interactions because drawing such equivalences shows the regularities that shape an episteme.

In the "Introduction" to *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick repudiates this method. "Reducing affect to drive in this way," she writes, "permits a diagrammatic sharpness of thought that may, however, be too impoverishing in qualitative terms" (18). A few pages later, she reiterates the point, but this time as a methodological axiom: "To describe [affect] in terms of structure is always a qualitative misrepresentation" (21). In other words, structural explanations produce poor scholarship and they do so at the expense of accuracy. The account of her methodology in *Between Men* might "describe affect in terms of structure" (2), but it does not describe affect as a structure, still less as a drive. Affect circulates within structure as its fluid basis. Affect, structure and objects together form a system capable of manifesting as a plurality of different emotions while retaining its identity.

The definition of affect Sedgwick employs in her early work situates the subject

as crisscrossed by competing forces that operate at different speeds and degrees of choice: social structures and structures of feeling at the slowest and most conceptual level and flowing through those structures the fluid crosscut of bodily sensation.[30] Affect names the moments before undifferentiated visceral arousal gives way to recognizable emotion. It is against this definition of affect that Sedgwick and Frank take to task Ann Cvetkovich's book, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*. They argue that Cvetkovich reifies emotions as a singular substance "affect," which can only be qualified as present or absent. In their comparison of Cvetkovich's work with that done in cognitive psychology, Sedgwick and Frank disparage the notion of a pre- or non-emotive affect. They write:

> So ask yourself this: how long does it take you, after being awakened in the night by (a) a sudden noise, or (b) sexual arousal, to cognitively "analyze" and "appraise" "the current state of affairs" well enough to assign the appropriate *quale* to your emotions? That is, what is the temporal lag from the moment of sleep interruption to the ("subsequent") moment when you can judge whether what you're experiencing is luxuriation or terror? (*Shame* 19, quoting from *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* 219-220)

Sedgwick's question might be rhetorical, but Brian Massumi has an answer nonetheless: It takes exactly one half of a second. Or, rather, Massumi's one half of a

[30] As I write this note, I feel dizzy and muffle-headed. It is late July and hot. I am hungry and worried that I am ill. At the end of the summer, I will leave my home. I am sad. Which one of these is me? Which is a social structure? Which an emotion? On what implicative or explicative level shall I place my dizziness? Say, rather, that "I" emerge in the meeting of these speeds and slownesses, these demands and demurrals, these chemical and cultural and psychic forces.

second describes the duration between any stimulus and its cognition as a stimulus, a duration that Sedgwick's hypothetical question glides over, neglecting the scene of sensory impingement in order to move directly to the fully cognitive, fully self-reflective inquiry needed to make the question seem absurd. Take the example of a forgotten thought: By the time one can say "I have forgotten," the act of forgetting has already happened and in the temporal lag between forgetting the thought and remembering that forgetting some trace of the thought persists such that one might wonder about its *quale*. Massumi's own example, which he discusses in "The Autonomy of Affect," the opening essay in his *Parables of the Virtual*, comes from a research experiment that asked subjects to respond to an electric pulse. The researchers found that only pulses that endured longer than one half second were felt, a finding that led Massumi to conclude that sensation "is organized recursively before being linearized, before it is redirected outwardly to take its part in a conscious chain of actions and reactions. Brain and skin form a resonating vessel" (28 – 29). This is in fact quite ordinary. We break the link between impingement and sensation all the time in order to still their vibratory feedback, for instance by administering anesthesia before surgery, and we do so exactly by disarticulating them from cognition. However, where the example of surgery might falsely suggest that conscious perception must be erased for impingement to remain disassociated from sensation, Massumi's example calls on us to imagine the obverse relationship: that cognition arises as a subtraction of the half-second in which "we" were not the subject of a bodily event. He uses a second example drawn from cognitive psychology to corroborate this point. A group of test subjects were asked to flex a finger at the same time that they noted the time on a clock. Again the researchers found that

physical action preceded the subjects' notation that they had decided to take action by one half of a second. In other words, the decision to act came after the action.[31]

"Will and consciousness," Massumi writes in conclusion, "are subtractive. They are limitative, derived functions that reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed" (29). Emotions may indeed found experience as Sedgwick's affect theory posits, but experience is itself limited by the missing half-second and all it implies. Cognition envelopes all of our missing half-seconds in a linear cause and effect narrative that can seal over the gaps in experience. Against Sedgwickian affect, whose reassuringly familiar topos conceals nothing that can't be immediately apprehended based on our shared experiences, Massumian affect is gone before we can track it. Yet it leaves traces. The gap between what happens to me and those "formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions" (35) that make up my emotional spectra accounts for the dizzying quality so often imputed to emotion and so difficult to explain using only the tools Sedgwick gives us. Rather than deriving from the content of that emotion, the disorientation that emotion can create comes before the emotion has been fully established, from the unlived but apprehended fullness of that half-second that terminates in a stable, designated emotion. Disorientation is the trace of its passing. As Massumi writes, emotions "are the capture and closure of affect" (35), but, like a forgotten idea, some trace of the "being outside of oneself" (35) escapes from that closure as remainder that reminds us that emotion comes coupled with something else, something unnameable that we nonetheless call affect. If the resulting term seems overly "hygienic" (Sedgwick and Frank 17) in its

[31] There is a danger that in using Massumi examples as evidence I will leave myself open to refutation on the basis of the empirical data. Suffice it to note that what is at issue here is not ferreting out the true workings of perception, but rather shifting our conceptual tendencies.

switch from "*finitely multiple qualitative differences*" to an "*undifferentiated* stream of originary matter or energy" (emphasis theirs 18), it may be because the term, in apprehending what it names, becomes instead a concept – "formed, qualified, situated" (Massumi, "Autonomy" 35). Given that it precedes our willing and our experiencing, even when we remain the putative subject of that willing or experiencing, it might be more accurate to say that affect takes us as its vehicle on its way elsewhere.

Where it takes us winds up thwarting any easy correlation between representation and emotion. Massumi begins "The Autonomy of Affect" by relating the findings of an experiment whose protocol was determined by a peculiar mass phenomenon. A German television stationed showed a short silent film in between its main children's programming. The plot was utterly innocuous:

> A man builds a snowman on his roof garden. It starts to melt in the afternoon sun. He watches. After a time, he takes the snowman to the cool of the mountains where it stops melting. He bids it goodbye and leaves. (23)

But the children found it upsetting, and so their parents complained. The research team created two further variations of the show, one with factual explanations added and the other with statements explaining the emotions each scene depicts. They then asked the children to rate the three versions in terms of their experience of it on a "pleasant-unpleasant" axis and to rate how happy or sad they found the content of the film (23). What they found was that the happier they perceived the content of the film, the more unpleasant they found it. The factual version was the most unpleasant to watch, but was found to be a depiction of happiness; the wordless version that had upset the first group

of children was rated by the tested children as the most pleasant to watch, but also the saddest in its content; the emotional version landed in between (24 – 25). Moreover, the children's vital signs were monitored and so the researchers could see that the unpleasant, factual version roused their heart rates but the pleasant and sad wordless version triggered a galvanic skin response. Rejecting the explanation that the children simply found happiness distasteful, Massumi conjectures that the two scales on which the children were rating the film stand in differential, rather than causal, relation. In other words, the content and its effect exist on separate but interacting planes. The more work the content does to establish and clarify causalities, as in the factual version, the less pleasant is the experience of watching it. By fixing the meanings, the narration "interfered with the images' effect" (25) whereas the emotional version, by "re-register[ing] an already felt state" (25), amplified the images' reception.

The lessons Massumi draws from this experiment – that semantic content does not necessarily correlate with felt reception – shifts attention from the feelings in the text (representations) or the feelings about the text (ideological critique) to the feeling of receiving. He begins by noting that when we talk about narration we are really discussing an embodied enactment of temporality. Plot arouses expectations and anticipations along a continuous line of unfolding. It also elevates heart rate. Image reception pulls against plot's forward thrust. The strength and duration of our fascination with an image creates a non-progressive intensity. This, too, is temporal and embodied. Where narrative takes everything up and marches it forward, intensity creates pockets or sinkholes that appear motionless but would be better characterized as transfixed, open and receptive but without significance. Unlike the narrative enactment of purposive action, these temporal

sinkholes reserve potential action as vibratory intensity. They have "tendencies" (30) based on prior contexts, but not necessary next moves. If they are pleasant, Massumi suggests, it is because their incipience precedes an event whose enactment will capture some of its energy as plot and allow some to escape as remainder. "When the continuity of affective escape is put into words," Massumi writes, "it tends to take on positive connotations. For it is nothing less than the *perception of one's own vitality*" (emphasis his 36). Intensity's trace feeds into narrative sequence, resonating with or being lessened by the content. Though expectations and intensities are both bodily events, only our expectations can be sensed: "Intensity," like the missing half-second, "is the unassimilable" (27). To name it pleasant or passionate is already to jump registers to the emotional, the plot-driven. Despite its elusiveness and difference from the plot-machines of subjectivity, intensity couples with expectation. We might imagine every apparently smooth line of extension pocked with dark patches of vibratory intensity.

We have encountered this chiaroscuro before: in the white walls and black holes of Deleuze and Guattari's faciality machine, in the promise of final significance imputed to the sign in its theological disposition and in the asignifying black holes of queer jouissance. Indeed, in his earlier work, *A User's Guide*, Massumi devotes a long section to the child's face, if we accept that the child's face is also in his toe:

> A baby is a vortex. Observe a smiling infant's toes. The joy of eye-to-eye contact with its mother resonates through its body and comes out the far end in a kick. Every impulse travels instantly in waves from the point of impact to every region of its body, where it is translated into an action that amplifies or muffles it. (Massumi 68)

This baby is no metaphor. Through his example, Massumi furnishes a physiological correlative to meaning and its analogs, and in doing so gives us a way to discuss them outside of the contexts to which they have attached themselves. Keeping in mind the baby's smiling toe, we can recognize meaning, the word, theology, language, jouissance, psychoanalysis or sex as a series of attempts to match the shape of the vibratory intensity of reception through formed content.[32] And we can reimagine knowledge-based modes of inquiry as plotted, anticipatory extensities whose reliance on producing feeling comes from its entanglement with reception. Together they form two lines of co-modulating rhythms and syntactic-semantic repetitions.

In "Techno-Cinema," Bianco defines technoscience as "experiments with matter in *non-human* durations and extensions" (emphasis hers 380). Her study explores contemporary cinema as an especially visible instance of "the thresholding and induction of designed affects (catastrophe, capture and control)" in technoscientific culture through which we "are made faster, slower, livelier, deader, more non-organic, more narrowly centering, and far too loosely centrifugal" (381). Her definition of techno-cinema recodes reception away from analogical correspondence of image and experience toward what she calls, citing Ronald Bogue, an "aesthetics of force" (380). Massumi's missing half-second reminds us that reception is always already a process of material impingement, system-to-system transcoding and re-presentation within a new substratum, or literally, "experiments with matter in *non-human* durations" (italics mine, Bianco, "Techno-Cinema" 380) as light waves become excitations of the rods and cones of the retina

[32] This does not, of course, mitigate the consequences of the ontological assumptions that emerge from their differing orientations. Those differences can have substantial stakes. However, I submit that their shared use as affect-machines gives us a way to discuss them that is akin to Sedgwick's discussion of homosociality and homophobia.

become chemical-electrical impulses in the non-agentive interval between impingement and cognition.[33] Henri Bergson describes what happens in that interval in terms that explain why perception does not consist of pure representations of the images or objects from which they emanate:

> What you have to explain, then, is not how perception arises, but how it is limited, since it should be the image of the whole, and is in fact reduced to the image of that which interests you. But if it differs from the mere image, precisely in that its parts range themselves with reference to a variable center, its limitation is easy to understand: unlimited de jure, it confines itself de facto to indicating the degree of indetermination allowed to the acts of the special image which you call your body. (*Matter* 40)

It would be tempting to refer to Bergson's conception of perception as *physical,* as opposed to *representational,* in order to highlight the dual role of the body as medium for the image's transmission and as index for its translation. That word, however, is far too easily elided into acts of will and choice, on the one hand, or reduced to specific bodily mechanisms, on the other. The word both Massumi and Deleuze use to characterize the suspended, transitive state that reception precipitates is, rather, *passion,* a word they adopt from Baruch Spinoza's affect theory "to distinguish [affect] both from passivity and activity" (Massumi, *User's* 28). In Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, passion refers to the interval or duration during which an idea opens a transition between two states of

[33] I am grateful to Samuel Delany's Ashima Slade for explaining this to me. See *Triton,* Appendix B.

activity,[34] much as Massumi sees disorientation as less an emotion than a kind of passional dissonance set off by the simultaneity of two states.

Passion easily fits into an ecology that also includes pleasure, bliss and jouissance. Like bliss, passion seems to name a bodily state brought about by an object-oriented emotion; but like Barthes's use of bliss to name the reception-affect of language pushed beyond the limits of sense, so passion sidesteps its objects. Even more so, in fact, since passion betokens no particular style, not even a particular medium. Though Massumi's examples privilege televisual images, Bianco argues that for both text and image "the brain/processor is the interface" ("Affective" 29). The difference in effect between image and text comes from "the instantiated rules and algorithms" (McGann, qtd in Bianco 27) by way of which "they are designed or coded to move us" (emphasis hers Bianco 25).

VII

"Meaning is force." (Massumi, *User's* 1)

Take a triangle. Make it obtuse. At the apex put the child. At the lower left angle, put the fixed present. At the lower right, the receding horizon. This is the shape of the child-figure.[35] Tug its right angle. Spin it 90° so its acute angle points out toward you. Fold it over into a barrel or a gun that shoots a mesh of triangles. This is the child as fractal generator. A meshwork of triangles. A network of the child's face. Give it duration. Spin out along the temporal axis through the links in its redundancies. Make the fixed present flow at the usual rate of human perception. Slow it by half and half again

[34] He cites Spinoza: "An affect that is called a passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before" (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 49).
[35] Freud's Oedipal triangle would be a notable instance. See Freud *Three Essays* .

and half again and half again as it approaches closer to the fixed horizon. Use Zeno's Paradox as an algorithm. Wallpaper the child's face, Warhol style. Fractalize it as a Mandelbrot series. Hum it.

> Sonorous or vocal components are very important: a wall of sound, or at least a wall with some sonic bricks in it. A child hums to summon the strength for the schoolwork she had to hand in. A housewife sings to herself, or listens to the radio, as she marshals the antichaos forces of her work. […] For sublime deeds like the foundation of a city or the fabrication of a golem, one draws a circle, or better yet walks in a circle as in a children's dance, combining rhythmic vowels and consonants that correspond to the interior forces of creation as to the differentiated parts of an organism. A mistake in speed, rhythm, of harmony would be catastrophic because it would bring back the forces of chaos. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 311)

Here, again, the child. And, indeed, we are still well within the domain of human affect, human material codes and capacities. But by morphologizing the child as a shape, we've forced it to lose its grip on content and representational fidelity. By making it a refrain, we've uncovered the hopscotch song that keeps it moving through us. By humming it, we've taken it into ourselves and made it resonant in the chamber of our sternum. And by introducing transcription errors that break its speeds, rhythms and harmonies, we've broken open its circle and distributed its forces back into the chaosmos[36].

[36] On the chaosmos, see Guattari, *Chaosmosis.*

Coda:

On Science Fiction

> "A story is closer to the interaction of magnetic fields than to what we think of as life. And perhaps life is, too." Joanna Russ[1]

Joanna Russ's definition of narrative fiction in the above quotation reverses the terms and values of aesthetic arguments that tout the superiority of realist writing. Where realism insists on the primacy of "life" (24) construed as psychological interiority, Russ emphasizes the qualities stories share with physical phenomena. Her definition considers stories to be dynamic processes rather than containers for content. Magnetic fields, the example she uses, are not equivalent to the magnetic poles or electric currents that produce them nor do they succumb to reduction as a property a magnet possesses. Instead, the field names the force generated between magnets and currents. Detectable only by its effect on what it affects, the magnetic field is neither an individual thing nor a sensible object, but it also isn't an epiphenomenon or a metaphysical abstraction. It is a relation of force. Placing stories on a continuum with magnetic fields characterizes them as a set of capacities and relationships. Stories, in other words, are produced from and productive of a field of force relations whose inter- and intra-actions fold according to their own internal constraints and degrees of freedom. We might call these constraints and degrees of freedom *laws*, except that that word mechanizes a physical description. Mechanical interpretive protocol, analogous perhaps with new critical hermeneutics, seal

[1] *To Write*, 24.

the object off from the movements of time and the diversity of potential impingements. Assuming that the constraints, once defined, will always produce the same results, makes the meaning appear to be fixed in the text. By contrast, Russ's physical metaphor suggests that texts have determined limits and capacities; they aren't random, in other words, but neither are they closed. They have rules, protocols, but also contexts. What emerges from the interface of rules and contexts may be probable, but not necessarily predictable. As in the static rules of chess, there is no game without time. By defining all stories as possessing a physics as well as a poetics and a politics, Russ calls attention to their extra-diegetic properties.

"Speculations: On the Subjunctivity of Science Fiction," the article from which I have been quoting, ends with Russ's provocative characterization of stories. But it begins with a much narrower focus on one genre, science fiction. Even more narrowly, it begins by asserting the exceptionality of science fiction, its distance from and difference from other contemporary forms. Russ's concern in the article is that the then-current methods of interpretation employed by scholars in departments of English do poorly when applied to science fiction. Honed to the conventions of realist writing, she argues, they have no traction with science fiction and its exception from the norms and standards of mimeticism. Whether this was or is still the case for science fiction novels in English departments is less to the purpose than that it is by way of constructing a theory of and for science fiction, that Russ – a science fiction writer herself as well as a critic of the genre – comes to redefine stories in toto. Perhaps surprisingly, her essay moves from genre considerations to a general theory of writing. From the perspective of scholarship in science fiction, however, this arc is not at all surprising. Rather, it is common in

science fiction criticism despite the apparent problem introduced by the claim to exceptionality, a claim that is *also* common in science fiction studies. I want to put pressure on the tension already inherent in this positioning of science fiction as errant and paradigmatic, as resembling the literary through its violations of resemblance to the real and yet as the borderlands where resemblance as such might be theorized.

Put this way, the distinctive tendency of science fiction scholarship to categorize, catalogue and redefine the genre and its movements loses some of its wearying connoisseurship. The repetitive investigation into the genre's workings can be seen as a product of the problem introduced by trying to pin down something that is neither single nor essential. But, I'd like to suggest, it may also be that despite the quest for clarity the very recursiveness of the attempt holds open the space to think about questions of pattern and paradigm that happen in and through science fiction and science fiction scholarship. Jacques Derrida ("Law") puts this movingly: "The genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason, order of reasons, sense of sense, truth of truth, natural light and sense of history" (81). There is a vacillation in this list between the two instances of the word *genre* – the genre whose name heads a list of resemblances hypostatized into qualities and the genre that "play[s] the role of order's principle" (81) by directing the law of identity and difference, constituting, as it were, the difference between identity and difference. Experimental modernist and postmodernist fiction highlight the disorder such an order necessitates by its endless production of anomalies and exceptions, what Derrida calls its "madness" (80). Science fiction, I am arguing, attempts to raise the questions that arise from genre,

taken this time as order's principle; but it tries to raise them as *its genre*, that is, by way of the themes and tropes that account for any work's classification.

By the logic of exceptionality, as well as the dictates of realism, science fiction should not be the paradigm for the literary. It is a late arrival on the literary scene, at less than a century old.[2] As the claims to exceptionality attest, it little resembles the rest of the literary universe. Moreover, as itself a category within the literary, it cannot serve as the overarching pattern for the literary. And even if there were to be such a genetic genre, why should it be this genre whose literary merit has been the source of continuing controversy? If, despite these protestations and against the grain of its own claims, science fiction seems nonetheless to bear some non-obvious relationship to the paradigmatic, and I think it does, it is not therefore the case that all stories are in some sense science fiction, nor that all instances of science fiction express the same generic qualities. Rather, in its distance from the dictates of mimeticism, SF renders content a model of form and form a model of modeling. In its distance from mimeticism, science fiction cannot rely on the ruse of descriptive correspondence. Like the postmodern works with which it is most often compared, and with which it shares many qualities, science fiction's fictionality is always a part of the story it tells. Indeed, we might as well reverse that to say that the story it tells is a part of its inquiry into the status of fiction.

This statement requires several steps to fully unravel. Russ contends that science fiction has a strong, if not unique, relationship to this idea of narrative because of its formal interest in change. As she puts it, following Samuel Delany's felicitous

[2] Here is an example of the madness of genre: dating the origin. Some scholars would include utopias and fantastic voyages as instances of early science fiction, which would make the genre considerably older. See for example John Rieder's excellent *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*.

formulation, science fiction has a subjunctive relationship with ontology, that is, with the category "what is." This relationship has been well established in science fiction criticism. Brian McHale, for instance, cites the "ontological dominant" ("Toward" 247) as the most definitional characteristic of cyberpunk science fiction and the source of its affinities with postmodernism. In sketching this genre definition, he contrasts science fiction and postmodernism with what he describes as the modernists' obsession with epistemology. While I agree with McHale's major contention that science fiction, and cyberpunk science fiction in particular, bears an important relationship with ontological modes of investigation, I find his elaboration unsatisfying. His examples of science fiction's typical ontological questions privilege the spatiality of their constructed worlds. He writes:

> Ontologically-oriented fiction (postmodernism, SF) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is a world? How is a world constructed? Are there alternative worlds, and if so how are they constituted? How do different worlds, and different kinds of worlds, differ, and what happens when one passes from one world to another? Etc. (247)

The emphasis on exploring the "world," in the above quotation, comes from his earlier definition of science fiction as the preeminent genre of world-building. World-building, he argues, comes in two generic forms, the extrapolative, which as its name suggests extrapolates future social organization from current circumstances, and the speculative, which speculates on how social organization would differ under other conditions. Both build highly specified, but neither empirical nor realist, worlds as settings. Curiously, and this gets to the meat of my objection, McHale employs the terms extrapolation and

speculation[3] in order to show the distance between consensus reality and the diegetic worlds. Yet, he takes the resulting differences to be finished, at an end, lacking in internal dynamism, even though they clearly imply that science fiction worlds are in motion along the axis of time within the narrative frame.[4] The list of questions about ontology assumes a finished world whose primary axis is spatial and whose construction happens before the opening of the novel. In other words, for McHale, extrapolation and speculation do not extend to the world in the narration. Indeed, I would argue that his questions are not ontological at all. Rather, in their reference to a single knower who seeks to know how best to know an object, they exemplify epistemology. Importantly, however, McHale's questions only pertain to the fictional world. By contrast, Russ recasts the novel as a meshwork strung horizontally across the fictional world and vertically to encompass its form and structure, grammar and genre.

By giving the novel the capacity to differ from itself over time, her provocation opens up questions concerning its ontological status. However broadly we construe her definition, it remains the case that she takes science fiction as her paradigm. Delany's definition goes some way toward an explanation: "Science fiction writes about what is neither impossible *nor possible*" (italics hers 22) but potential. Because of their dedication to internal coherence and external verifiability, science fictional works

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[3] McHales borrows these terms from Carl Darryl Malmgren's *Worlds Apart: Narratology in Science Fiction* as the originator. Suvin and Todorov should also be cited in this context.

[4] Consider, for instance, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* series. Because Robinson's novels' conceit is that science has discovered a way to extend the human lifespan, the trilogy can cover almost four hundred years. In that time, the Mars colonists wage a war and a civil war, terraform Mars and permanently change the human genetic code. The plethora of science fiction novels that span many generations bespeaks the genre's interest in how and why worlds change. In other words, if they look like epic histories, that's because they are.

generate a web of relationships with their own protocols and rules. Crucially, though, these webs are then set in motion through narrative. Indeed, Delany's subtitles re-denominate many of his novels as parts of a larger work called *Notes Toward a Modular Calculus*, which, though it rarely gets mentioned in the novels, we might take the novels as instances of. His most explicit elaboration of the modular calculus comes in the appendix to *Triton*, a fictional essay by the (also fictional) philosopher and mathematician, Ashima Slade:

> The problem of the modular calculus, again, is: How can one relational system model another? This breaks down into two questions: (One) What must pass from system-B to system-A for us (system-C) to be able to say that system-A now contains some model of system-B? (Two) Granted the proper passage, what must the internal structure of system-A be for us (or it) to say that it contains any model of system-B. (302)

A typical postmodern device, Delany's inclusion of a philosophical treatise inside a work of fiction has at least as much to do with the transfer and translation of systems, the topic of the passage, as it does with the novel as form. Moreover, Delany's decision to label some of his novels (or in this case, parts of a novel) as chapters in a larger work (whose "larger" version exists only in the frisson the reader generates in fitting them together) challenges the ostensible unity and purity of genre. Clearly, in giving his novels a second function as pieces of a larger treatise and then saying almost nothing about that treatise in the novels, Delany expects that we will come to see fiction as akin to philosophy. Conversely, as much as philosophy, already legible as a model for the real, stands in the same relation as fiction to that real – that is, in a subjunctive relationship – we may

consider philosophy a form of speculative fiction. Perhaps we can say that science fiction, in its self-conscious interest in ontology, maintains a less naïve relationship with referentiality and representation than the cohort of disciplines whose investigations into the ontological warrant the proud and vexed name *empirical science.*

The model is an important tool of empirical science because the model allows for the generation of evidence that can serve as the basis for truth-claims without contaminating the operations of the real thing it models. In other words, models metaphorize phenomenon. Donna Haraway remarks; "Models, whether conceptual or physical, are tropes in the sense of instruments built to be engaged, inhabited, lived" (*Modest_Witness* 135). Often accused of a lack of interest in character, science fiction makes the movement of systems its primary subject. By thematizing the vitality of multiplicities above and below the scale of the person, such as social bodies and historical processes, at one end, viruses and cells at the other, science fiction theorizes the physics of narrative. Russ's definition of narrative therefore not only makes it a proper object of study for the sciences, it also makes science fiction into narrative's own meta-methodology.

While I admire the way this argument thus centers the literary universe around a spurned 20th-century genre, the focus on science fiction unjustly limits the argument's scope and range. The final clause – "And perhaps life is, too" (Russ, "Speculations" 24) – intimates how broad that range might be, depending on how we construe the word "life." If we take it to mean what it does in the first sentence of the above quotation, then we might read Russ as suggesting that emotional interiority co-assembles with other, equally important properties of the human. Understood in this way, the sentence calls for a

physics of human interiority, something presumably like psychology in its emphasis on those components that exceed personality by giving rise to it. Here we might consider her argument against symbolic interpretation as an apt analog. She writes:

> In any fiction a sequences of words may be simultaneously a real person, a character, a mood, a structural element, a figure […], and an allegorical or social idea (for example, part of an abstract didactic statement). Modern fiction is obviously so – and in modern fiction the structural element may contradict the figure, the figure may contradict the character, and so on. (23)

To interpret on the model of depth, which gives precedence to symbol as the most fundamental, and therefore the truest, level of meaning turns the mobile couplings of narrative elements into a static archaeological site whose layers we excavate. Russ's hermeneutics favors simultaneity and models signification as a consequence of the performance of reading rather than a property awaiting discovery. Imported as a statement about human psychic life, this description of narrative mobility would characterize a radically un-psychoanalytic psychology whose primary question might be something like "What can this system do?" rather than "What does this symptom mean?" In psychology, exactly this re-orientation was effected by Silvan Tomkin's theory of the affect system, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has brought to the attention of the humanities after a century of Freudian Oedipal analysis. Unlike Freud's drive theory of psychic life or the stages of infantile development, which read symptoms as epiphenomena of deep, vertically compacted, traumatic experiences, affect psychology characterizes the subject as primarily relational, as a surface in constant interface and

exchange with itself and with others. By reimporting this back to narrative, we might say that a system such as a person or a story results from the co-modulating effect of its inter- and intra-actions. Its history only matters in so far as it leaves a legacy of constraint or freedom to the operations of the system, as in the proverbial river, whose waters one can only ever swim once because the whole system of mountain run-off, riverbank and current is in ceaseless motion.

Already in exploring the more limited denotation of "life" as subjectivity we have entered into its broader denotation as life itself. Perhaps the notion of narrative as mobile system, and its apparent confusion of the animate and inanimate, seems too science-fictional. A book after all, is neither a system nor a body, but printed matter, and a story is only in motion while a reader reads it. Both these objections are true enough. Readers provide the motive-power for stories. Just the same as any other form of life, stories need nourishment. Plants must have light and water to be green and flowering; stories must have readers to swap intensities. What, though, of non-fiction? Why not assert the physics of writing, as indeed we might say was exactly deconstruction's intervention? The point is not to make a case for the uniqueness of science fiction, fiction or even for writing, but rather to show their shared participation in the material universe. "A book is a little machine," as Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze write in the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, "it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds.… In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories, but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (3-4). If this seems to attribute undue liveliness to the non-living and to complicate the binary between agent and receptacle, mover and moved, then our

discussion of books has opened onto the denotation "life-itself." What else might be thought of as alive in the sense that Russ assigns to fiction and Deleuze and Guattari to books, i.e. responsive to its own internal dynamics in interaction with, but also in excess of, outside agencies?

The philosopher of science Manuel DeLanda poses a similar provocation in his essay "Non-Organic Life," first published in *Zone: Incorporations*. He begins by observing a paradigm shift in the physical sciences. The hallmark of Newtonian physics, he argues, is the use of "conservative systems" to generate the norms and standards by which to characterize the physical universe. So-called conservative systems are isolated from interaction with their environments and thus form a stable, single and self-coherent unit. They are opposed to open systems, which are defined by their openness to certain kinds of matter and energy flows. While conservative systems result in cleaner, more easily manipulated and modeled mathematics, they are actually far more rare. Using open systems as models results in very different view of ontology, one in which the auto-catalysis and auto-poeisis of living systems starts to seem a) meta-stable within dynamism rather than tending to entropy b) tied to the flow of matter and energy from "outside" and c) for these reasons, homologous with the movements of culture and history (138).

In his recent work *A New Philosophy for Society*, DeLanda usefully explains that the resistance to applying these rubrics to human institutions comes from the persistent, intuitive sense that cultural and historical changes result exclusively from human actions. He contends that this sense of culture's "mind-dependence" (1), while correct, fails to account for the way that culture and history exceed human conceptions of them, models

for them or actions in them. He contends that though "we need to take into account that any explanation of human behavior must involve reference to irreducible intentional entities such as 'beliefs' and 'desires'" (17), these intentions are often met with unintended consequences whose ramifications may be subtle, wide-ranging and non-agential. In other words, "emergent properties belong to the *interactions between parts*"(italics his 17) and exceed the sum of those interactions, which is why "analyzing a whole into parts and then attempting to model it by *adding up* the components will fail to capture any property that emerged from complex interactions, since the effect of the latter may be multiplicative" (italics his 17-18) rather than additive. Though DeLanda doesn't say as much, the life that exceeds agential individuality can be most clearly apprehended through the multiplication that gives rise to complex effects. Not the causes as such, or the causers, not the effects themselves, nor the interactions that gave rise to them, but the force, the fact of multiplication accounts for what DeLanda calls non-organic life.

A quotidian acknowledgement of a complex, autonomous, non-living entity can be found in the frequent and commonplace citation of the "invisible hand of the market" in contemporary political discourse. Adam Smith's economic theory is an uncomfortable example because of its long-standing use as a justification for the free market and because it individuates an abstract process through the metonym of the hand. N. Katherine Hayles points out that this view of market interactions mimics the emphasis in other aspects of Enlightenment liberalism on rationality:

> Because systems were envisioned as self-regulating they could be left to work on their own. […] These visions of self-regulating

> economic and political systems produced a complementary notion of the liberal self as an autonomous, self-regulating subject. (86)

To push Hayles' critique a bit further, we might say that the value of Smith's view of the market for liberal humanism came from its assurance of the clear boundaries of the self. Systems that are self-regulating are also closed; their self-regulation depends on their capacity to discriminate desirable from undesirable penetrations and excretions. And, indeed, some systems are closed for just this reason – the gastro-intenstinal system and its series of voluntary and involuntary sphincters, for example – while the idea of systematicity implies that no system can be wholly open and maintain its own architecture. While the persistent characterization of the market as sealed off and self-regulating might have informed the construction of subjectivity, as Hayles has it, the discourse of self-regulation and the infrastructure it created were, in DeLanda's account of emergent complexity, just parts of a far-from-equilibrium system.

In fact, DeLanda goes some way to distance his theory from any economic philosophy by noting that economy, political economy and politics proper are each social institutions with their own assemblies of parts whose dynamic interactions meta-stabilize as schools or parties which in turn form parts of a multitude of other social institutions. Economic theories, in other words, form a part of the whole they seek to characterize and into which they wish to intervene. Always implicated in some assemblage of parts, these mini-systems take on a life of their own, to use the everyday expression, swirling like gyres, leaking into adjacent systems, swapping parts with like-minded systems, crosscut by slower moving, but longer lasting physical processes like boom and bust cycles. Yet economics serves as the privileged model of non-organic life for a reason. The very

messiness, intractability, uncertain duration and perplexing events leading up to economical catastrophes render humanism and anthropocentrism incoherent and frankly ideological in their failure to accurately describe our shared world. Our intimacy with complex economies intimates, on the contrary, that the greater our share of the planet's energies the greater the effect of non-human and non-organic forces on the human world.

Another way to encounter this idea – unsurprisingly given the opening claims for science fiction – is through cyberpunk and its imaginative descriptions of artificial intelligence and viral software. Here, for instance, is how the genetically constructed "human" protagonist in Chris Moriarty's 2003 novel *Spin State* experiences the organization of her emergent, net-based A.I.:

> She rode Cohen's networks like a hawk riding an updraft. She wheeled and soared, sideslipping into subnetworks, enslaved systems, communications programs. She felt out beyond them to the static-charged web of local communications that hung like an electric smog. (574)

And here is Cohen's answer to her desire to know who amongst his subroutines and systems was in control: "*Control* is too strong a word.… Do you think about how you walk down the street? Or how your stomach works?" (469). I choose this example because Moriarty is neither a well-known nor a particularly innovative writer. This narrative theorization of network ontology is standard for cyberpunk science fiction and has been since William Gibson coined the term "cyberspace" in the early 80s. Cyberpunk gains its name from Gibson's term, which he took from Norbert Weiner's own neologism "cybernetics."[5] Where cybernetics brought to communication theory the primacy of

[5] See Hayles, 36.

information to create patterns rather than essences that give rise to meanings, cyberpunk from its inception in Gibson's *Neuromancer* has pursued bifurcation points and emergences – the processes by which what Moriarity's A.I. calls "extremely expensive calculators" reach the intensity of internal connectivity needed to catalyze a phase transition and emerge as sentient. We might even call the ubiquity of A.I.s and cyborgs in science fiction the personification of its interest in networks, systems and non-organic life, or we might if that term didn't already contain all of the assumptions the A.I. works to destabilize.

Yet, bizarrely, personification is exactly the trope that cyberpunk novels use to image the outcome of emergence. In the novel I've taken as an example, the emergent A.I. uses old video of his child-creator, the fourteen-year-old Hyacinthe Cohen, "a thin, dark-haired schoolboy" (6), as his web avatar. Despite the insistent pluralization of selfhood, "we me" as Cohen puts it, speaking "with the typical Emergent AI's disregard of individual boundaries" (13), and the characteristic cyberpunk attempt to describe the interior of a networked entity, Hyacinthe fills in as the true self. Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a highly regarded forerunner to Moriarty's novel, makes the discovery of the emergent A.I. as child its dramatic climax. As in most cyberpunk, its repertoire of conventions comes from other paraliterary genres, principally from the detective story, the noir and the western, each of which introduces new obstacles to obscure the reader's view of what it cannot fully describe: the development of new forms of life. Cyberpunk novels diffuse and distract by designing the plot around a disinterested hired or coerced contractor with highly limited knowledge of the purpose of her work. Cyberpunk protagonists allege no interest in questions of ontology, of the effect of new embodiment or capacities on our

apprehension of the real, because at heart they are athletes who are too absorbed by what the tech can do to care about what it means. Yet the books themselves are highly invested in meaning, which is why they deny their protagonists the pure joy of operating the system. Case, *Neuromancer*'s archetypical consol cowboy, agrees to do the work that leads him to discover the existence of Wintermute and Neuromancer, the emergent A.I.s in the novel, because he has been denied access to the web as punishment for his outlawry and is promised its renewal as payment. All this demurral so that the revelation can come veiled in metaphor. In the case of Case, the metaphor is the scene itself: a flatlined cowboy on a beach with a girl and a child.

> "You're the other AI. You're Rio. You're the one who wants to stop Wintermute. What's your name? Your Turing code. What is it?"
>
> The boy did a handstand in the surf, laughing. He walked on his hands, then flipped out of the water.… "To call up a demon you must learn its name. Men dreamed that, once, but now it is real in another way. You know that, Case. Your business is to learn the names of programs, the long formal names, names the owner's seek to conceal. True names…"
>
> "A Turing code's not your name."
>
> "Neuromancer," the boy said.… "Neuro from nerves, the silver paths. Romancer." (243)

Like Cohen, Neuromancer chooses to present himself as a human child. Yet, also like Cohen, this child finds his primary signification in human history and its practices' contemporary analogs, rather than by signifying futurity. Although they thematize

emergence, they reference the lost mystic arts. In Cohen's case, a memory-palace he created as a synecdoche for his many memories and his subsystems' memories and as a response to his partner's greater capacity to manipulate spatialized multiplicity over coordinated simultaneity, humanizes, by referencing other modes of knowing, the complex system that Cohen is. To the extent that, as McHale puts it, "cyberpunk …translates or transcodes postmodernist motifs from the level of form (the verbal continuum, narrative strategies) to the level of content" (McHale 246), it takes the face of the child. But these are science fiction's own personifications, internal allegories of the algorithm by which it models systemic change. By setting worlds in motion, science fiction collapses "the boundary between science fiction and social reality" (*Simians* 147) as Donna Haraway famously put it, and in modeling, becomes

> a tool for blazing life lines, in other words, all of those real becomings that are not produced only *in* art, and all of these active escapes that do not consist in fleeing *into* art, takes refuge in art, and all of those positive deterritorializations that never reterritorialize on art, but instead sweep it away with them toward the realms of the asignifying, asubjective, and faceless. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 187)

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