

ENGAGING THE EIGHTIES: ETHICS, OBJECTS, PERIODS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

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by

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This dissertation examines a recent decade in American history whose unique notion of self-periodization generated important questions of ethical engagement and withdrawal. Situated during a time of an increasingly complex relationship between literature and theory, thinkers in the 80s self-consciously shifted towards making claims about their present moment which were based on the logic of rupture, and which thus created an either-or logic of pessimism or optimism in response to this rupture. These kinds of self-periodizing notions generally are collected under the rubric “postmodernism,” and the first chapter deals with a transatlantic movement between theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard who imagine the threat of rupture and what it suggests for individual subjects living in times mandated by so many theorists as constituting a radically new epistemological model. To analyze this perceived novelty in the American cultural landscape, the next three chapters focus on “objects of knowledge,” a term borrowed from Michel Foucault to describe stereotyped models of conduct: brats, surrogate mothers, and yuppies. The 80s’ vision of childhood was crystallized by the notion of “Brat Packs” such as the literary one that included Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City, discussed in Chapter Two. Building on that novel’s construction of the brat’s role in relation to dying mothers, Chapter Three deals with the important “Baby ‘M’” case, which, despite involving Biblical-era medical technology,

was presented as a novel legal situation that refocused arguments about how to define motherhood, particularly along the double line of a masculinist, postmodern “crisis of legitimacy” and late-70s, psychoanalytically-informed feminist debates about mothering. Chapter Four takes up the yuppie and demonstrates how that figure was associated at the end of the decade with the recently-popularized serial killer, when both were represented briefly in Hollywood cinema by the “Yuppie Psycho” film. Finally, as a counterpoint to these objects of knowledge, Kathy Acker in Chapter Five models a literary practice of “engaged withdrawal.” While postmodernism’s “catastrophic or redemptive” choice provides only one model for social relations, Acker’s texts move past this, taking up the interrelated questions of autobiography, of the woman writer, of mothering, and of women’s history.

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Introduction

Engaging the Eighties: Subjects after Theory

“Any effort to characterize the present cultural moment is very likely to seem quixotic at best, unprofessional at worst. But that, I submit, is an aspect of the present cultural moment, in which the social and historical setting of critical activity is a totality felt to be benign (free, apolitical, serious), uncharacterizable as a whole (it is too complex to be described in general and tendentious terms) and somehow outside history. Thus it seems to me that one thing to be tried--out of sheer critical obstinacy--is precisely that kind of generalization, that kind of political portrayal, that kind of overview condemned by the present dominant culture to appear inappropriate and doomed from the start.” (Edward Said, in Foster’s The Anti-Aesthetic, 156)

Before examining specific instances of the intellectual and cultural history of America during the 1980s, it is necessary to break ground for the political and ethical stakes of the discussion by defining a few terms. The moment of this project is the 80s, but since the subject (in both senses) of that decade has a much longer pedigree, the central problem I grapple with is how I can “engage the eighties,” and what to me are these 80s other than a play between the generic marker of my own childhood and the sense that it was also a meaningful period of remarkable growth for others? Forced to set aside my own relationship with the decade, it is difficult to see a way to state convincingly that there is some unifying thesis at work--that it would be fair to label the 80s a coherent “period” and not simply a “decade.” If this is the case, then the 80s, like other decades, may be no more than a collection of stories, among which we may pick

those that best serve our individual sense of the moment. The problem with a decade of such recent memory is that efforts to characterize the present or near-present require us to set it off against other characterizations of what came before and what comes after; we need a historical point upon which to pivot our analysis, to say that *this* story belongs to a period and *that* one does not. For the 80s, as for other decades, much of this is covered over by our numerological fascination with the wholeness of the number ten, but in justifying this we need something more precise to point our finger at and say “here.” In short, a mark to count as *our* break.

By *our* break I have in mind one different from the epistemological break held so dear by many postmodern theorists, who in the 80s focused on a discontinuity with older forms and styles variously grouped as modernism. Postmodernism serves as an umbrella term for what comes after, and the many debates over the proper or improper use of that word prove not only that it is a fluctuating category, but also that the meaning ascribed to the break which makes postmodernism possible also has a fluctuating cultural value. These two questions--has there been a break, and should one feel positively or negatively about it--recur throughout postmodern theory and, more important, throughout American culture in the 80s. But, is there a way of conceiving postmodernism that gets outside the question of positivity or negativity, a way to grapple with the break without reifying it in terms of this duality?

The figure who offered the most promise for coming to terms with such a problem in the 80s is Michel Foucault. Reimagining his dormant project of “a history of the experience of sexuality” (there was an eight year lapse following the 1976 French

publication of The History of Sexuality: An Introduction), Foucault in 1984¹ repeatedly

¹ Foucault died of AIDS-related complications 25 June 1984; much of the work I discuss was published in English posthumously. Rabinow and others have commented on the demarcations of the earlier periods of Foucault’s thought--most notably a transition from structuralist to post-structuralist thought, and I believe another turn was in evidence at the end of his life.

turns to what he viewed as the key problem for Greco-Roman civilization: *epimeleia heautou* in Greek, *souci de soi* in French, or “care of the self” in English. The process is as follows: around the concept of the care of the self--an injunction central to one’s own daily self-management, but also prior to one’s ability to master social relations with others--springs a whole host of historically differentiated “techniques of the self” (*techniques de soi*), which humans use in order to work on their “ethical substance,” thereby finally transforming themselves and their lives into a “work of art.” The focus throughout The History of Sexuality, but especially in the second and third volumes (and, apparently, in the incomplete fourth volume), is on the type of work that one can do in order to transform one’s form of self-relationship, neatly put in the title of an important 20 January 1984 interview: “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom.” Paul Rabinow, one of Foucault’s American supporters, discusses the complexity of this idea:

the mode of being to which Foucault was committed is captured in his ambiguous formula “to release oneself from one self” (*se déprendre de soi-même*). . . . Foucault is pointing to a certain self-distancing, and he advocated an exercise of detaching and examining parts that need to be cared for and ultimately repaired or replaced. Thus, the most adequate (or least inadequate) rendering might well be “to disassemble the self, oneself”--a phrasing that highlights the material and relational aspects of this exercise, and introduces a notion of the self as a form-giving practice that operates with and upon heterogeneous parts and forms available at a given point in history. (xxxviii)

The problematic task of the concern of the self (not *for* the self) provides the motivation for Foucault’s reworked project, and is not limited to a purely historical exercise (what

forms of self-relationship existed in the past?), but rather extends itself as an overarching philosophical question with implications for the 80s (what kind of progression of forms between periods is there; what forms have been recently created?)

I would like to share Foucault's starting point: "the proper task of a history of thought, as against a history of behaviors or representations[, is] to define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" (The Use of Pleasure 10). This goes much further than daily concerns such as considering appropriate social behavior, managing one's bearing, or picking a career; humans "also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Use of Pleasure 10-11). The second and third volumes of The History of Sexuality are taken up with isolating illustrative moments when humans force such a reinvention of themselves by creating networks of otherwise apparently irreconcilable conditions. After finding themselves facing a new problematization of their existence, the "techniques" that are developed to resolve this problematic then become part of a civilization's mode of existence, until a new problematization is broached and the process repeats. In this, it is important to note that the techniques not only "resolve," but also "create" problematizations just as the self operates "with" and "upon" these techniques. One example to illustrate this process is Foucault's discussion of the way Greek culture codified a paradoxical attitude towards sexual conduct by "stylizing" dietetic regimen. The Greeks "never imagined that pleasure was in itself an evil . . . and yet their doctors worried over the relationship between sexual activity and health" (Use of Pleasure 97). So, rather than develop specifically religious or legal injunctions against certain sexual practices (that is, a proscribed *moral* response), the Greeks built up around

this problematization terms relating to “a certain way of caring for one’s body” “more ‘dietetic’ than ‘therapeutic’” (that is, a lived *ethical* response) (Use of Pleasure 97-98).

This “medical problematization of sexual behavior was accomplished less out of a concern for eliminating pathological forms than out of a desire to integrate it . . . into the life of the body” (Use of Pleasure 98). In this example, Foucault shows us a shifting series of displacements of the problematization onto “techniques of the self” which are in service to the “care of the self”--we see as a result not codes of living, but styles of living. By focusing on the integration of these techniques of the self into the self, as opposed to a strategy of elimination, Foucault stresses the ways in which problematizations are not simply “problems” to be solved, but rather means by which an experience of “the life of the body” can be negotiated and renegotiated.

Now, Foucault never writes to fix such moments; instead, “it’s always the relative beginnings that [he searches] for, more the institutionalizations or the transformations than the foundings or foundations” (Foucault Live 57). To that effect, one can see Foucault’s distinct version of a historical work that opposes itself to the search for representations or behaviors: “problematization doesn’t mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn’t exist. It’s the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought” (Foucault Live 456-7). For Foucault, problematization means both entering the archive to look at the “domain of acts, practices, and thought” (Ethics 114), discursive and nondiscursive, by which humans at various times have confronted the question of the truth of their existence, and also to demonstrate this problematizing moment as neither resolved or resolvable, nor distinct from other, object-based, kinds of historical work. Following this, Foucault’s

methodology provides a preliminary point at which to grasp the question I began with: how to make sense of the recent past, seeing the eighties as distinctly periodized as well as continuous in history.

My awkward formulation in the last paragraph, “humans at various times,” is meant in part to conceal one significant problem raised by entering the archive. While Foucault in his study reconstructs a few centuries of “Greeks” and “Romans” (and primarily male ones at that),² I fumble here and elsewhere for the name of my own subject, trying out such formulations as “the eighties,” “the 80s,” or “the 1980s,” rejecting “Americans in the 1980s” or “the American Nineteen Eighties.” Likewise, for Foucault the method of problematization is imbricated in the problem of periodization, and Foucault must complicate his task by eschewing the notion of a periodizing break. “One of the most destructive habits of contemporary thought,” he says in an interview with Gerard Raulet, is “that the moment of the present is considered in history as the break, the climax, the fulfillment, the return of youth, etc.” (Foucault Live 359). Addressing the danger in this type of thinking for historical studies of the present, Foucault also works to rectify other historians’ tendencies to consider past historical moments as unitary--this generation distinct from that, this movement broken away from that, these people anticipating those. Foucault enjoys beginning with such commonsense arguments (e.g., the “repressive hypothesis” or the notion that Greek culture was homosexual), and especially those arguments which institutionalize a contemporary zeitgeist along teleological lines, which is another example of the privileging of the present. “What right does my present have to speak of my past,” asks Roland Barthes (Roland Barthes 121); Foucault twists the present’s assumed right over the past by working continuously to turn “this development of a given into a question” (Ethics 118).

² cf. Diamond and Quinby, and Jardine.

After examining Foucault's method of problematization, it seems the case that, despite disavowing the rupturing break which would set the present apart from the past and offer a narrative of periods, there is nonetheless a sense of a program in his historical investigations, especially when the reader is invited to extrapolate from the historical elements to his or her own "present day actuality" (more on this phrase momentarily). Foucault predicates his emphasis on ethics and the self on an individual's prior constitution as an epistemological subject: "one could not form oneself as an ethical subject in the use of pleasures without forming oneself at the same time as a subject of knowledge" (Use of Pleasure 86). Yet, Foucault urges us to get away from the idea of self-knowledge (and here I wonder how self-knowledge, history, and periodization align) as a prerequisite for existing successfully:

we have been taught throughout the 20th century that one can do nothing if one knows nothing about oneself. . . . [T]he important thing is: what is the art of putting into a work what one does, for being what one is. An art of the self which would be the complete contrary of oneself. To make of one's being an object of art, that's what is worth the effort. (Foucault Live 318)

As he elaborates the "art of the self" in his later work, Foucault gives primacy to this idea of an individual ethics artfully programmed around the subject's initial epistemological investigations. In "Subjectivity and Truth," a written summary for a 1980-1981 course at the Collège de France, which concerns much of the material of The Use of Pleasure, Foucault more clearly expresses the relationship between a subject's "techniques of the self" and his or her epistemological questioning:

In short, it is a matter of placing the imperative to "know oneself" . . . back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What

should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one “govern oneself” by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions, the domain in which they are brought to bear, the instrument they employ, and the subject that acts? (Ethics 87)

In this passage, Foucault recenters the philosophical subject into a cultured body, bringing artistic and technological questions--at heart, questions of style--to bear upon an entire range of actions, practices, thoughts, speech, and behaviors. If there is always work to do on the self, if there is always another way of life, then every action, thought, instrument, etc. is invested with and by the rather serious question: now what should I do? Here we may begin to see more clearly the programmatic aspects of Foucault’s thought,³ especially in the inherently transforming function of the techniques used or practiced; they are “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being” (Use of Pleasure 10). Later in The Use of Pleasure, Foucault notes the Greco-Roman subject’s desire “to make his life into an *oeuvre* that would endure beyond his own ephemeral existence” (139), an idea which returns in those striking passages in the later interviews, characterized by a sort of morose and sublime injunction: “one should work on one’s suicide all one’s life” (Foucault Live 318). I cite this to demonstrate some of the ways in which Foucault’s historical project, at once far removed from the American 1980s, nonetheless begins to overlap with similar concerns and anxieties expressed therein. In particular is the development of theories of postmodernity and the resulting

³ From this perspective, the idea that these arts of existence come together to form a perfect way of life seems to suggest a liberatory promise. Yet, Foucault will caution against this; it is not the case that one can simply pick the “best” technologies of the self in order to achieve the “best” way of life. When an interviewer talks of “a work of the self on the self that may be understood as a certain liberation, as a process of liberation,” Foucault is quick to respond, “I would be careful on that score” (Foucault Live 433). Elsewhere, he points out the same problem as he conceives it in terms of power: “liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom” (Ethics 283-84).

discussions (and, later, the so-called “culture war”) over the selfsame issues of individual ethics, governmentality, and bodily use that Foucault discussed in light of the Ancients.

To connect the ways in which Foucault’s project works as a model for my own, I must start with the claim that the 80s, while not necessarily qualitatively distinct as a period (that is, not organized around specific totems or taboos, or images or politics [“objects, behaviors, or representations” in Foucault’s terms]) is yet coherent in its incoherencies. What binds the diverse theories about this age (collected here under the rubric “postmodernism”) is that they each reflect a more vocal performance of the kinds of problematization that Foucault analyzes. I am tempted to call this performance a sort of meta-problematization, but that characterization seems to me to be too much a part of those same postmodern theories, to which we could make the same criticism that Fredric Jameson made of Jean-François Lyotard, that the latter only offers another form of what he seeks to analyze. I have already illustrated one potentially false reading of Foucault’s “program” for the period he was writing in--he was not expecting liberation in problematization. This bears repeating in the context of Foucault’s political activities in the 80s, but even more so in reference to his contemporaries’ programmatic (re)structuring of the present (that is, the 80s) as a postmodern age with a newly dominant style or mode or form.

In a 1983 interview, Foucault stresses that “the question I start off with is: what are we and what are we today? What is this instant that is ours? Therefore, if you like, it is a history that starts off from this present day actuality” (Foucault Live 411).

Interestingly, the obvious surface of the “present day actuality” tends to be scrubbed from Foucault’s texts. For example, Discipline and Punish (1975, translated 1977), as invested as it is in analyzing something as heady as “a historical ontology of ourselves in

relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others” (*Ethics* 262), does not once make clear the identical struggle that Foucault was engaged in during the book’s production, when he helped to form the prison activist group Groupe d’Information de Prisons (GIP). To any who was aware of Foucault’s political activities (and inactivities), this connection would be transparent, yet Foucault’s textual restraint is remarkable, if not remarkably curious. In this, his work manages to constantly straddle the contemporary and historical; in his texts, that which is now historically impossible for us to understand (for example, a concept of sexuality not yet fully moralized, or living in a “confining society” instead of a “control society”) is doubled by those contemporary concerns he never plainly states (sexuality and AIDS, the Prison Group struggle).

What is most intriguing is that Foucault does this during a time when so many others, focused exclusively on the present or the near-present, were near-hysterical in the public sphere; in the context of a history of the 80s, for example, it is interesting that Foucault consistently manages to avoid that erstwhile unavoidable word “postmodern,” even when asked point blank about it. Writing of antiquity, or of the 18th or 19th centuries, Foucault rarely may have had reason to mention postmodernism or AIDS or GIP, but the discursive practice around postmodernism, AIDS, or GIP is clearly in line with what he would call a current problematization of the care of the self; Foucault’s discussion of an ethical (not moral and not religious) shift in Greek and Roman private life surely resonates with a shift in contemporary humans’ techniques of the self: while the details vary, what is important is that we reconceive of the history of an ethics of the self *as* process, and not attempt to reconstruct distinct historical subjects, fully-formed and representative of some earlier principle of *telos* (with the consequent tact of just searching

for historical remnants from earlier periods). The fact that Foucault never explicitly says as much distinguishes him from his contemporaries. Rather than, say, utilize the notion of the break in order to limn a clear historical period, Foucault insisted on connecting histories together, and in doing so offered his readers a template for reconceiving their own relationships to their selves, which also do not follow clear breaks or programs.⁴ By telling us that “classical language had a term for designating . . . an ‘attitude’ which was necessary to the ethics of pleasures[:] *enkrateia*” (Use of Pleasure 63), Foucault invites his readers to ask what term contemporary language would use to describe its own relationship to itself: postmodern, future-proofed, the new wave, transhuman, yuppie flu, post-futurism, post-humanism, post-feminism?

I began that last list with the most important theoretical idea of the 80s: postmodernism. But, before proceeding too far along these lines, I should mention the commonplace about postmodernism--that one really only deals with postmodernisms. While, as we shall see, postmodernism is a term used in the 60s and 70s (for example, by author John Barth⁵ and about architect Robert Venturi⁶), serious debate really takes off around 1984, and it is only at the end of that decade and the beginning of the 90s that we see the dramatic increase in books with “postmodernism” in their titles. This is due both to follow-on critics capitalizing on the new word’s success and focusing on particular aspects of postmodernism (Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon), and also to important collections of previously published essays (such as Jameson). However, my interest lies

⁴ “I do not seek to detect, starting from various signs, the unitary spirit of an epoch, the general form of its conscience: something like a *Weltanschauung*” (Foucault Live 35). “I have compounded them, I have described clusters of relationships” (Foucault Live 36).

⁵ “Some critics have called this postmodernism, and that seems to me a useful term to describe it, so long as it’s not a mindless atavism or regression which denies that the first half of the century has happened. Put like that it sounds like a manifesto, but one invents one’s aesthetic as one goes along to describe what one’s been doing” (Barth BR35).

⁶ cf. Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966) and Learning from Las Vegas (1972), although the word does not appear in these works.

more in the effect of the word “postmodernism” than the cause. For many, the cultural experience of the 80s is described by postmodernism, and postmodern theorists seem to tell us about “the way things are”--they describe, observe, demonstrate from cultural evidence a periodizing theory about the way the present is different from the past. Postmodernism’s rapid success mediates our experience of the 80s; whether or not is is “true,” postmodern theory thus forms an object against which one stands, pro or con. In part due to the fact that much of the more academic postmodern theorizing, focusing on capitalism (Jameson) or philosophy (Lyotard), make up a truly dense and diffuse set of rhetorical arguments, the more crucial or timely aspects of culture (e.g., women, patriarchy, or race) go untheorized in postmodern terms, although postmodernism ostensibly covers *everything*. After Foucault, we can suggest that postmodernism’s pride of place is due in part to what it does not or cannot handle, dealing only with those items that are recuperable unto itself. So, rather than sort through the various postmodernisms in an attempt to find a right or wrong one, I will leave it to the reader to consider, when I use the word postmodern or -ism or -ity, whichever version they may accept as a substitute for my own. Having said that, for completeness’s sake, the following paragraph represents some more recognizable postmodern “talking points”:

The two most famous definitions are Jean-François Lyotard’s (“incredulity toward metanarratives”) and Fredric Jameson’s (“the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism”), although this may be due to the strikingly composed nature of their texts. See also the way that Jameson reformulates his personal critical reading list in a sort of semiotic square of the break included in his Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (61). Discussing Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Jencks, Tom Wolfe, Manfredo Tafuri, and Hilton Kramer, Jameson categorizes them along three

valences: anti-modernist/pro-modernist, anti-postmodernist/pro-postmodernist, and progressive/reactionary (for example, Habermas is progressively pro-modernist and anti-postmodernist). See also David Harvey's The Condition of Postmodernity, a strange cousin to Jameson's text which claims that postmodernism is related to "the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time." Another important collection of names is found in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, edited by Hal Foster, with contributions by Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Craig Owens, and Edward Said among others; we read there Jürgen Habermas' important claim (shared somewhat by Marxist Alex Callinicos) that modernity is an incomplete project, and that instead of giving up on it, we should learn from postmodern theory's mistakes. On the other side of this argument (that there has not been a break with modernity), are those such as Ihab Hassan, whose The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature first gave us that famous list of differences between modernism and postmodernism (purpose/play, design/chance, hierarchy/anarchy, etc.), and Andreas Huyssen, whose After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism wonderfully romanticizes by its title the claim that postmodernism basically attempts to negotiate high art with mass culture. Two more categories of postmodern critics: those concerned with the novel and readings of postmodernism in literature (Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale), and those concerned with the scene: Jean Baudrillard and Arthur Kroker exemplify the more hyperbolic practices of this postmodern thinking; one might defend them by claiming that they practice what they preach. And, as a final name drop, Meaghan Morris's The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism.⁷

⁷ And, as a final footnote, I have left out all those anthologizing critics, who practice a more editorial, although no less important, function: e.g., Steven Best, Douglas Kellner, Linda Nicholson, E. Ann Kaplan, Jonathan Arac, and Steven Connor.

To segue onwards to what postmodernism as a periodizing hypothesis might mean, I want to offer in Foucault another genealogy and an alternate method for attempting to periodize the 80s. Rather than propose for the 80s a new list of postmodern “techniques of the self” or a new mode of subjectivity, I want to investigate what I have been suggesting is the 80’s own central problematization--the larger question of postmodernism’s periodizing hypothesis. To get to this, I want to borrow Foucault’s phrase “objects of knowledge,” by which he refers to figures that “were privileged objects of knowledge, which were also targets and anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge” (History 105). Foucault has in mind four figures central to his study of sexuality: “the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult” (History 105). I want to adopt the same methodological approach for the 80s, and, investigating not sex but postmodernism’s problematization, focus in Chapters Two through Four upon three objects of knowledge of the American 80s: the brat, the surrogate mother, and the yuppie. While this discussion of Foucault may seem outside of the primary theoretical landscape of the postmodern 80s (dominated as it initially was by critics such as Jameson, Lyotard, and Habermas), it is my position that postmodernism’s periodizing hypothesis, founded on the notion of the break, specifically involves the subject’s ethical relationship with history, which Foucault allows us to get to. The figure of the brat and the Brat Pack in Chapter Two focus on constructions of childhood and maternity; Jay McInerney’s best-selling novel Bright Lights, Big City in particular captures the brat’s matrophobic angst as he attempts to reinvent himself in 80s New York City. The surrogate mother and the father who hires her in Chapter Three dramatize the logic of paternity; the case of “Baby M” and the resulting legal maneuvers and media spectacle dulled America’s sense of maternity by means of a legal fiction. And

finally, the uneven strategies of wealth and gender become apparent in the rise of the yuppie discussed in Chapter Four; the obverse of this is then expressed in popular films and novels like Blue Steel and American Psycho, which seek to contain an earlier excitement over wealth by contaminating the yuppie with the figure of the psycho killer.

Now, initially these objects of knowledge are a bit of an organizing fiction (and the particular examples more popular than literary), yet for this reason I hope to show how each demonstrates, in their own fictionality, the periodizing problem of the 80s. By focusing on what is left out, or what cannot be spoken about the social types generated by and in a periodizing of the present, each of the chapters will undermine the persuasivity of ostensibly liberating postmodern subjectivity by highlighting the unspoken refusals necessary to create these new objects of knowledge or new social types.⁸ For example, Jay McInerney's novel Bright Lights, Big City, which I examine in Chapter Two, continually performs a willed ignorance to what is the protagonist's central trauma--the refusal to speak of mother loss and consequent matrophobia. Likewise, the court opinino in the Baby M case in Chapter Three has a difficult time speaking the other mother, Elizabeth Stern, who is doubly excluded by her husband and her gestational counterpart, the surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead. And the unraveling of the Yuppie success story discussed in Chapter Four avoids associating the yuppie's power with anything other than money, going to lengths to set aside the crucial gender relations at play. So, while each of these objects of knowledge is flawed in its representation of an actual, lived, sense of 80s subjectivity, as stereotypes, or public expressions of general characteristics and trends, what each leaves out or works to minimize can provide us with

⁸ And we should mention here that some of these fictions are truly new to the 80s; for example the legal invention of surrogacy allows some women access to the myths of motherhood, or the increase in financial instruments allows Baby Boomers to pursue the myth of the American Dream on Wall Street.

clues to the kinds of concerns and anxieties at work during this period.⁹

Chapters One and Five, then, bracket our stereotypical objects of knowledge by examining the cultural effects that the transmission of these narratives may have. To begin to explain, let me cite Jean-François Lyotard: “Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary culture; you listen to reggae; you watch a western; you eat McDonald’s at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong; knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows” (Postmodern Explained 8). While Lyotard’s 1988 description of the eclectic subject has certainly been borne out by later 90s Generation X fiction and today’s technologically-prompted proliferation of global commerce (trafficking itself as “multiculturalism”--could Lyotard have expected “fusion cuisine” or the occasionally ridiculous “fashion forward” dressers of today’s magazines?), there is a counterpart to the eclecticism of culture, and that is the degree zero of eclecticism itself. By way of explanation I will turn to the American cinema, which in the 60s was absorbed by archetypes, in the 70s was intent on revising and destroying these same myths, and in the 80s finds itself intrigued by the iconographic remnants of our older styles. Most clearly, the forebears of later Gen X slackers’ world-weary style is on display in science fiction films such as Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982) or literature such as Thomas Pynchon’s Vineland (1990). But to signal this catholic heterogeneity, 80s cinema also performs the obverse: we often see eclecticism reduced to its singularities. Walter Hill’s New York gang film The Warriors (1979) exemplifies this. Each of the 50 or so gangs featured in the film dress in a highly particular style, each member wearing matching uniforms, makeup, and weapons. There is a cowboy-themed gang, a hip-hop gang, a mime gang, a Black Panthers-style gang, a baseball gang, and so forth. The

⁹ Another point to mention here is that narratives around these objects of knowledge not coincidentally revolve around family types, and especially maternal relations, providing an additional comparison between these examples.

Warriors gang does battle with each, and so while overall the film demonstrates a certain visual eclecticism, its narrative nonetheless proceeds by means of a proud anxiety over maintaining individualized group identity and keeping other styles at bay. We see this repeated throughout 80s cinema, which can be read at a visual level as eclectic, but rather often thematically reinforces one stylistic dimension at the expense of others.

Key examples of this are found in the films of John Hughes, which often take place in or around high schools. Hughes uses teenagers to draw attention to the postmodern failures of their parents and teachers, and his exclusive subject in the first half of the decade--the suburban teenager with dysfunctional family--is evocative of a youth culture dealing with yuppiedom. In films like Sixteen Candles (1984), The Breakfast Club (1985), Pretty in Pink (1986),¹⁰ and Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986), adolescents enter a complicated world not their own, whose contradictions and depthlessness they must navigate. Hughes's staging of such paradigms of adolescence expresses for adult filmgoers both anxiety over their own moral failures as self-absorbed yuppies, as well as the disruption of the social order by postmodern youth, wildly bent on a pastiche form of rebellion redolent of 1950s culture, yet misplaced onto an otherwise tame suburban landscape. In particular, his films The Breakfast Club and Ferris Bueller's Day Off perform a similar fracturing of contemporary eclecticism by positioning characters in opposition to each other based on rigidly defined iconographies.

At its heart, postmodernism loves types, and Hughes obliges. The Breakfast Club centers around students from each of five recognizable high school social groups--"a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal"¹¹--who are stuck together in Saturday morning detention and must overcome their natural distaste for each other in order to have

¹⁰ Hughes's protégé Howard Deutch directed this film, while Hughes wrote and produced.

¹¹ Or, as the movie's poster put it, "a brain, a beauty, a jock, a rebel, and a recluse."

a good time and to learn something about each other and themselves. Structured around the principal's requirement that they write an essay on "who you think you are" (a voiceover reading of which begins and concludes the film), The Breakfast Club shows the teens coming to the realization that they are less different than they imagined, that instead they were brainwashed by the principal and the structure of high school to think of themselves as representative of these rigidly defined stereotypical roles. As an indication of the truth of this discovery, various of the characters pair off romantically and make promises to be friends next Monday in the school's hallways. This egalitarian fantasy of high school life, generated by the student's consciousness-raising detention period, is highly appealing to each of the teens. Hughes later film Ferris Bueller's Day Off offers a more iconoclastic version of this basic setup. Shermer High School senior Ferris Bueller (Matthew Broderick) fakes an illness in order to skip school and enjoy his day off in Chicago with his best friend and his girlfriend. The villainous Dean of Students, Edward R. Rooney, is out to catch the clever Bueller, who is undermining Rooney's disciplinary hold over the student body. The problem, though, is explained to Rooney by his dimwitted secretary Grace, who notes Bueller's popularity: "the sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, wastoids, dweebies, dickheads; they all adore him." This humorous list serves two purposes; first Grace points out how out-of-touch the authoritarian Rooney is, (Hughes used this strategy earlier, the secretary's role played in The Breakfast Club by the omniscient janitor Carl), and second the list extends The Breakfast Club's quintet of eclecticism into quite bizarre territory--who exactly are the "dickheads" and how do they get along with the "bloods"? One can only assume that these social groups are recognizable to the cognoscenti (like Bueller), and that Shermer High School's stylistic options are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and complex

(consider that the earlier The Breakfast Club was also set in the fictional Shermer High School).

When we later juxtapose these popular manifestations of postmodernism with male postmodern theorists such as Jameson, Lyotard, and Baudrillard (discussed in Chapter One), we find that the 80s is especially open to a form of subject constitution based upon a surface/depth model that ostensibly liberates individual subjects by first reducing them to social types. Hughes' teen films share with adult films such as Wall Street (dir. Oliver Stone, 1987) and The Bonfire of the Vanities (dir. Brian DePalma, 1990) (set not in school cafeterias, but in boardrooms and courtrooms) the problem of successfully navigating through an extremely fragmented social sphere by means of imitation, while simultaneously retaining and developing a healthy individual self. Who *could* heroically solve the problem posed by increasingly distanced and codified social groups? The Breakfast Club, for example, gets around this by finding common ground for all in a shared teen experience, while Ferris Bueller becomes, through his precocity and awareness of the shortcomings of parents, a transversal figure, able to cut across multiple social arrangements.¹² The unsuccessful example of this navigation is Sherman McCoy in Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities (1987), a novel which also figures the 80s as specifically a problem of urban sociability. As the Yuppie says to the New York Times Editor, quoting Woody Allen: "I love being reduced to a cultural stereotype" (Holtzman E20). Haynes Johnson, in his study of the Reagan era, Sleepwalking Through History, likewise uses the yuppie as an example to comment that "the American penchant for pop-culture definitions to characterize groups of citizens became a feature of the eighties"

(124). In Fear of Falling (1989), Barbara Ehrenreich, in a statement that could be applied

¹² Otto from Alex Cox's Repo Man (1984) is also key in this respect, as is Mookie in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing (1989). These two films deserve to be examined more thoroughly alongside Hughes's Brat Pack cinema.

directly to The Breakfast Club, quotes a U.S. News and World Report sidebar on “Beatniks, Preppies, and Punks: The Love Affair with Labels” to demonstrate how “in the mass media, class often appeared to be a way of life, even a set of options adding color and texture to an otherwise increasingly homogenous America” (201). This sense of homogenization, and the middle class fear of falling, suggest more than ever that individual “color and texture”--style--is a survival strategy as much as an aesthetic. This kind of role-taking subjectivity and the faddish fascination with cultural types leads to problems in terms of periodization, and especially postmodern theories’ formulations of the new subject.

What many of the postmodern theorists I discuss in Chapter One fail to consider is the vibrant ways in which cultural and media productions of our objects of knowledge fall apart in the face of lived experience. The stratification of individuality (the “love affair with labels”) is partly a result of what Ehrenreich “fear of falling,” but it is also a product of theoretical statements about postmodernism. It would be easy to say that periodizing statements made in the 80s do not accurately reflect life, but go some way towards creating the world they describe--but this statement too is caught up in postmodern practice, especially a Lacanian or linguistic notion of subject formation. Rather, each of these constructions, these models of behavior or objects of knowledge, are similar to postmodern theorists’ practice. If postmodernism is perceived as a stylistic way of approaching the world, likewise our objects of knowledge need to be examined as strategies and not particular subject types. The problem is how to conceive of subjectivity in a world characterized by postmodernism, or rather by the necessity of adopting a stance to postmodern theory’s increasingly hegemonic role in cultural analysis. Gilles Deleuze expresses the negative side of this in a 1990 conversation with Toni Negri:

“What we most lack is a belief in the world, we’ve quite lost the world, it’s been taken from us” (Deleuze, Negotiations 176). Fredric Jameson adds to this feeling, beginning his study of postmodernism by noticing “an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that” (Postmodernism 1). The two poles of the catastrophic and redemptive run through postmodern theorizing, but it seems to me that whether a critic is hesitant about or embracing of postmodernism, this distinction ultimately closes off, for the 80s subject, the potential to approach postmodernism without already being interpellated by it.

In Chapter One I want to show how a postmodernist conception of a break with history constructs not specific political or economic or cultural conditions, but rather political, economic, or cultural “styles” that exaggerate a discontinuity with their predecessors. It is under this label of a style that postmodernism puts forth, in Foucault’s terms, the clearest indicators of a suggested, programmed technique of self. Postmodernist style is paradoxically at odds with itself; contributing an ostensibly liberating narrative of subjectivity, postmodernism nonetheless simultaneously tends to conservative effects. Against a narrative of postmodernity is Foucault’s version of prior civilizations’ self ethics. I propose that the 80s, if it may successfully be periodized, can be so in light of responses to the dominant ideology of postmodernism. What Foucault remarked about the Ancient’s concern with the care of the self (their ethics of self) is made even more relevant by postmodern strategies of heterogeneity and complexity. That is, in light of such postmodern pronouncements as the “death of the subject,” the “end of history,” a “waning of affect,” or a “crisis in legitimation,” the relation between an individual’s epistemological self and his or her ethical self is even more fraught. This anxiety is demonstrated most by theorizations of the historical break and specific

considerations of the threat of past and future breaks: on the one hand, Hiroshima and Auschwitz, on the other, Raymond Williams' "Plan X" and Nuclear Criticism.

In order to discuss this problematization between the subject and knowledge, I will in Chapter Five introduce the term "engaged withdrawal," which I hope to propose as a third possibility against the catastrophic or redemptive readings of postmodern periodization, and especially the constitution of the notion of the break, which seems to me to be the key sticking point for this conception of the 80s. Allow me to place the latter part of the term in abeyance until then, and begin simply with a few remarks on "engagement," which addresses the ethical self in the 1980s. By "engagement" I mean the question of the individual's concern regarding an axis between the self and the socius. Foucault explains this by opposing his form of political activity against Jean-Paul Sartre's. Foucault attacks in 1979 Sartre's idea of the "committed intellectual" by proposing "experience with . . . rather than engagement in . . ." (*Ethics* xix, ellipses in original). The practice of engagement, as Foucault reads Sartre, becomes a problem when the morality of actions supersedes their ethics. It is, in a sense, for Foucault better to be than to do, and so by "engagement" I do not mean Sartre's committed intellectual (with his *littérature engagée*), but rather the forms and practices of one's daily experiences in their engagement with the quotidian. It is, after all, these practices and choices which demonstrate one's ethics of the self. Being aware of our forms of engagement or withdrawal allows these choices to be separated from politics, which is another way of reconceiving the individual as a node in a larger power network. While Foucault makes it clear that concern with the care of the self inevitably precedes concern with the care of others, "engagement" is a limit point for precisely that expression of the social field--the

success or failure in the use of one's "techniques of the self" in relation to others.¹³ And this is where postmodernism comes into play. According to many postmodern theorists, the 80s were in particular a period of disengagement, indicated by a waning or flattening of affect not unlike schizophrenia (Jameson), an inability to productively think historically (Lyotard), or a type of expansion of hyperreal simulations (Baudrillard). On the other hand, artistic works of high modernism that conflated high and low culture made possible for the 80s an arguably wider range of socially acceptable behaviors, activities, and styles. Descriptions of theoretical postmodernism, by grouping heterogeneity under a new marker of style (even when set off as a historical development), deal insistently with a paradoxical turn between proscription and permissiveness; while a postmodern world, with its supposedly radical unloosening of a firm conception of the humanist subject, is arguably a more accessible one for different, previously marginalized groups or peoples (or, even, styles), ultimately this postmodern freedom turns on itself by a conservatizing effect. There have, however, been ways of dealing with postmodernism that are neither catastrophic nor redemptive, neither enthusiastic of nor dismissive of culture, and this strategy I term engaged withdrawal. Kathy Acker, who I examine in Chapter Five, in particular provides a model of this kind of thinking outside of binaries.

We can see how postmodernism manages to be the most obvious discursive expression of the play between self-awareness and self-engagement in the 80s. Deciphering the nondiscursive aspects of postmodernism is what initial postmodern theorizing is about; rather than offer a contrary critique of what postmodernism means, I will confine myself to the production and use of the word postmodernism by some

¹³ This prompts a simpler definition: engagement is the use or apparent use of one's "techniques of the self" in relation to others (which is to say, to the socius).

dominant critics such as Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard,¹⁴ who reveal the particularly rich negotiations of postmodernism and periodization (in a sense, the writing of contemporary history--a tautology on one hand and a model on the other). For better or for worse, disentangling a genealogy of the 1980s from a genealogy of theoretical postmodernism is a central problem. The obviousness of the claim of those who take postmodernism as a given tends to obscure postmodernism's discursivity; whether it truly is or not, postmodernism presents itself (is presented) as the dominant strategy of the 80s, although it is in fact (as nearly everyone also admits) simply one form or style or logic. If postmodernism, whose boom occurs in the 80s, reigned as that decade's controlling theory, we must ask in what "speech from the present" can such an argument be made? In other words, even if postmodernism were necessarily the "cultural logic" or "dominant," how can one distinguish between the rhetorical (with concomitant political, social, and economic) strategies and the thing itself?

¹⁴ It is my intuitive sense that these two men are "dominant" critics of postmodernism, although I certainly make that claim with the understanding that calling them "dominant" need not be read as calling them "most successful," or "coherent," or "correct," etc. A survey of "postmodern anthologies" of the sort intended for undergraduate classroom use or introductory surveys tends to support my claim.

Chapter One

Beginning from Ends: Postmodernism and Periodization

(Jameson/Lyotard/*Coupure*)

“Who are we in the present, what is this fragile moment from which we can’t detach our identity and which will carry that identity away with itself?” (Foucault, Ethics xviii, 1979)¹⁵

“Oh, has the world changed or have I changed?” (Smiths, “The Queen is Dead,” 1986)

I anxiously began the introduction by invoking a dilemma over a period versus a decade, whose “bigger picture” elides the question of specificity. The “bigger picture” for a study like this refers of course to those other decades not covered, and so brings to mind a whole host of similarities and differences with the past: the 1980s are like the 1920s in that they both featured an uncharacteristic display of wealth in the face of national poverty (and had similar crashes on Wall Street); the 80s are unlike the 50s in that they express differing attitudes about work or political activity. But these distinctions fall quickly into generalities, upset by any number of counterexamples. One popular way of distinguishing decades is to focus on technological or historical inventions, which stand in as physical (spatial) representations for larger, more amorphous philosophical (timely) changes. To mark the beginning of the 80s, for example, we may point to Ronald Reagan’s inauguration (1980), the introduction of MTV (1981), the first space shuttle mission (1981), IBM’s personal computer (1981), the VCR “format wars” and studio court battles (early 80s), or AIDS (1981-82). And, if decades can ever be said to properly end (rather than merely be replaced by a new one) we can mark the end of the 80s by such historical facts as the Wall Street crash (1987), the fall of the Berlin Wall

¹⁵ From “Pour une morale de l’inconfort,” his review of Jean Daniel’s The Era of Ruptures.

(1989) and the Tiananmen Square protests (1989), or Clinton's election (1992). We would end up with a historical dating of something like 1982-1992 (American politics), or 1978 to 1989 (international politics) or, with unusual (and humorous) specificity, Newsweek's calculation (economics) of "six years, 11 months, and 15 days," running from Election Day 4 November 1980 to the Dow collapse of 19 October 1987 (Barol 41). Between these covers are a series of micro-expressions which encapsulate the decade: Miami Vice (1984-89), "crack babies" (1984), the word "cyberpunk" (1983) or DJ (1984), power dressing (1980), "future-proofing" (1983, cf. "planned obsolescence"), and pop-n-locking (early 1980s). At this level of specificity, it seems that some event has happened to enable us to imagine such a diverse group of fashions, newspaper headlines, inventions, and stylistic freedom as representing a more coherent time. But, again, how to extrapolate from these diverse instances an overarching style, or network, or thesis?

Instead of polemicizing an alternative break against which to construct a more coherent "Eighties," I want to offer a period piece of historical thought: what sense can we make of the recent past (and the recent past's attempts to make sense of its own present) while seeing that past as both distinctly periodized ("the eighties") as well as continuous with its immediate predecessors and followers ("the late twentieth century" or "postwar America")? In partial answer, one anti-argument is that the 80s does not offer a new subject, does not mark a break with the past, that instead the 80s fails to cohere along some new schema. But then this is also the interesting part: in its retrospective incoherence (characterized by the incompatibility of all of the proposed 80s themes with each other) it is possible to read the 80s instead as a bridging moment, a smidge of throwaway culture to serve as downtime between the liberal fantasy of a post-

68 promise of “freedom” and a present-day crisis on the left over squandered advances (provoked by, and discussed as, a neoconservative revival, a return to the politics of the 80s). This “bridging moment” oscillates between a discursive conception of the 80s as a time of unbridled substance--of material fluidity and abundance--and a contrasting notion of the 80s as historical ephemera--as superficial and trashy. Not necessarily invented in the American Eighties, but certainly best expressed during that decade, two competing conceptions of the worth of the excessive material aspects of culture provoke a problem that fits the older dilemma of subjectivity into the newer dilemma of activity. Expressed otherwise, a question of ethics which is also a question of style: “what am I supposed to be doing, and in what way should I do it?” If we can trace a shift from epistemology to ontology during the 20th century, we can see in the 80s further evidence of a move onward from ontology to ethics. The Eighties, then, as shorthand for a sampling of the late twentieth century; a decade of much material substance, but of little perceived worth, a decade which acts as if it were already resolved, and which in that act expresses a basic underlying anxiety (to reenvision *Candide*’s decision): among all new possible styles or modes, which to adopt today? Or (to quote Ihab Hassan), how to answer “the cry around the world: ‘Who are we? Who am I?’” (“From Postmodernism” 6).¹⁶

To consider the asking of that question some two decades ago both privileges our historical distance at the same time as it reveals the limitations of that distance; if this were truly a period piece, it would likely be full of fiery rhetoric and more than its share of what art critic Peter Schjeldahl recently called “the roaring spirit of a time that, after the depressive seventies, had rediscovered the bliss of art, fashion, tremendous amounts of money in rapid circulation, and other forms of concerted indulgence” (101). This

¹⁶ Questions like these of course rely on many non-80s sources, particularly Lacanian and feminist notions of subjectivity, especially the mutability of identity. Judith Butler, for one, but also Gilles Deleuze.

“concerted indulgence” strikes me as a particularly keen way of explaining the construction of the time; we see an embarrassment in these kinds of more recent reimaginings of the 80s prompted by the twentieth or twenty-fifth anniversaries of this or that event. The indulgence--excessive, wealthy, fashionable--is in hindsight made worse by the supposed shameful and guilty conspiracy with which it was executed--could we really have been like that? But, as I think Schjeldahl points out, such a feeling may have even then in part guided the “spirit of a time.” Whether or not one is enthusiastic (or participatory in) these “concerted indulgences,” they do mark a clear example of what we can call an increased sense of “presentness” in the eighties--a sense of the significance of the contemporary or the recognition of the present-as-historical. After all, defenders and detractors of popular culture alike can agree to a claim that today is unlike any other; Christopher Lasch notes in 1979 that “to live for the moment is the prevailing passion. . . . We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity” (4). It is this historical play--the instant when the present moment becomes historically defined as past event--that returns us to the central problem of periodization and re/imagining history.

The problem of periodization for the 80s is contained entirely by the use of the word “postmodernism.” Postmodern theorists are dependent to some degree upon formulating the loss of historical continuity which many of them simultaneously lament. In this chapter, which focuses on the ethically debilitating effects of the prefix in the word postmodernism, we see an alternation in the 80s between optimism and pessimism as regards the contemporary landscape. In periodizing the present (and occasionally the near future), postmodernism raises an ethical problem for our later objects of knowledge; by emphasizing discontinuity and the break, it unmoors the subject’s access to history and memory.

I. Origin Stories, Birth Narratives

The success story of the word *postmodernism* demands to be written, no doubt in best-seller format; such lexical neoevents, in which the coinage of a neologism has all the reality impact of a corporate merger, are among the novelties of media society. . . . Why we needed the word *postmodernism* so long without knowing it, why a truly motley crew of strange bedfellows ran to embrace it the moment it appeared, are mysteries. (Jameson, Postmodernism xiii)

The mystery Fredric Jameson bemusedly poses in the introduction to his central text of postmodernism, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, is in guise another formulation of the question “how to periodize?” The introduction, written in 1990 (the title essay initially appeared in New Left Review in 1984), reimagines the decade in order to conceive how a single word could so rapidly achieve a level of success in both intellectual and popular discourse. While Jameson’s book (itself a success, if not a best-seller) is aimed squarely at academic audiences, presumably the populist “success story” of the word could likely tell us just as much about the 80s as the theoretical narrative does, notwithstanding (or perhaps due to), say, Ihab Hassan’s disapproving take on the word’s success: “in any case, we can hardly imagine any other epoch agonizing so much about itself, only to devise so clunky a moniker, so awkward a name as postmodernism” (“From Postmodernism” 6). Postmodernism, often defined as a radical breaking apart of traditional narrative structures, not-so-ironically ends up becoming the central metanarrative for highbrow historical readings of the 80s in America; Jameson’s

book is certainly required in that respect.¹⁷ While Jameson was neither the first nor the last person to use the term “postmodernism,” his contribution was a particularly electrifying one, bringing together as it did a number of otherwise fragmented discourses (such as architecture, economics, and video art). As he puts it, perhaps the word was so popular because it “seems to have been able to welcome in the appropriate areas of daily life or the quotidian” (Postmodernism xiv). But, as Jameson suggests about his and others’ versions of postmodernism, this metanarrative which intends to break apart narratives had as a result a peculiarly promiscuous entrance. We (and here Jameson unites us) *needed* this word to explain ourselves, but when we (and here Jameson divides us) showed up to embrace it, the party turned out to be a rather mixed and mysterious affair.

What is interesting about Jameson’s comment on the word postmodernism is that it elides some of the issues of periodization that he will deal with, and also starts to show how, for the 80s, heterogeneity can become the new homogeneity. In Philip Roth’s The Counterlife (1986), Nathan Zuckerman longingly thinks of “America . . . where people claim and disown ‘identities’ as easily as they slap on bumper stickers” (308). What interests me most about postmodernism is that very sense of mutability, Jameson’s kinky bedfellows each finding in the word postmodernism an object of/for affection. By acting as a banner under which a number of differing theoretical positions can rally, postmodernism has a theoretical imprecision (really, a failure of consensus) which accordingly makes the term useful for popular or mass cultural representations of the times. We can up the ante; not only is postmodern theory the dominant strategy of the

¹⁷ If book jacket blurbs count: “an encyclopedic grasp of modern culture” (Stuart Hall), “a timely riposte to fashionable leftist pessimism” (Terry Eagleton), “a classic of late 20th-century Euroamerican critical thought” (Ned Lukacher), “a fundamental, nonpareil text [of] not just the cultural but the political and social implications of postmodernism” (Gilbert Adair).

80s, but the word “postmodernism” itself affected the cultural landscape of the 80s more than any other word, and more than any other idea (and, by extension, even more so than the actual *idea* of the postmodern). When postmodernism, something that a few French and Germans and Marxists argue about in highly philosophical language, appears in Newsweek magazine,¹⁸ then we have a clear example of the impossibility of controlling the embrace of Jameson’s strange bedfellows. What I mean to suggest by this is that beyond the specific differences between individual, discursive articulations of “postmodern theory,” there is a larger cultural articulation of “postmodernism” as an umbrella term to describe strategies (discursive and nondiscursive) that create in the 80s the self-aware sense of living in a new age. To imagine oneself in the 80s as a postmodern subject requires a sense of difference and novelty (for both academic critics as well as middlebrow individuals), and results in the assumption of a confused style which would allow the strange bedfellows of history to lie down together.

To take a specific example, Todd Gitlin examines car commercials in Watching Television (1986) in an effort to determine how much interplay there is between the material examples of cultural events, critical commentary on the contemporary moment and its anticipation of the future, and a society’s own awareness of itself. He asks, borrowing Raymond Williams’s term, “are we in the presence of a clear-cut ‘structure of feeling’ . . . that forecasts the common future as it colors the common experience of a society just at or beneath the threshold of awareness?” (159). This problem is especially evoked in car commercials and television shows like Miami Vice, which “suggest that the highest destiny of our time is to become cleansed of depth and specificity altogether” (139). Yet, it is not as simple as suggesting that car commercials lead to postmodernism

¹⁸ On six occasions in 1984 alone. Lance Olsen informs us that in “1980 21 articles appeared in major American newspapers . . . that used the word ‘postmodern.’ In 1984 there were 116. In 1987 there were 287” (qtd. in Bertens The Idea of the Postmodern 12).

or that postmodernism leads to car commercials. One problem I want to adopt from Gitlin is “to understand what relation there is, if any, between the stylized blankness growing in the culture and the actual state of feeling in American society today” (159). Unwilling to believe that “the emphasis on surface; the blankness of the protagonist; [and] his striving toward self-sufficiency to the point of displacement from the recognizable world” (139) are characteristic of the lived experience of most Americans in the 80s, Gitlin suggests that postmodern qualities like blankness are more of a coping mechanism to handle contradictions created by the sixties, “a way of managing contradictions by pretending we don’t care” (160). Whether this is true or not, at the least “there is something revealing and disturbing in a culture many of whose most serious talents propose to cast away feeling, to confine themselves to the surface, to beg questions of purpose and authenticity” (160).

So, distinct from any academic discussion of the theoretical implications of postmodernism would be a consideration of the problematization of a subject’s identity that the word postmodernism provoked--whose postmodernism is this, and what postmodernism is whose? In the gap between the epistemological injunction (know thyself) and the ethical injunction (be thyself, but properly), the word postmodernism provides a screen (or, for Jameson, a sheet?) upon which to perform and to judge that performance. What could it mean to imagine oneself as a postmodern, or to think that one could be or already has been “turned” postmodern, or that one lives, willy-nilly, in a new postmodern environment which one must adapt to; these are the sorts of questions of effect which critics like Jameson tend to avoid. Yet, these are the questions that best characterize an 80s sense of engagement and the problem of imagining the present as a newly definable, slightly futuristic time. Connecting the various threads of the

postmodern critique I will discuss below--etymological narratives and the recourse to or lack of a historical record, anxiety or paranoia over missing or misunderstanding the significance of history or of the concept of the modern, the interlacing of contemporary fashion and theory--is the problem of who “we” were yesterday, and what might make us different today. Or, for a popular audience, to learn that we are different today requires one to consider how and why we were different yesterday. For the average academic, the “postmodernism” that Jameson limns is surely not the same “postmodernism” on display on Late Night with David Letterman (1982-1993) or Saturday Night Live (1975-present); however, for the average American, these two may seem indistinguishable. This is noticeable in those proposals for ever newer, derisively labeled “posties”--postfuturism, postfeminism, posthumanism, postcapitalism, post-Enlightenment, post-history, post-memory. While these later responses to the first post- of modernism indicate a possibility for self-renewal and invention, the suddenness with which so many were ready to give up on or give away history is troubling.

Rethinking the word postmodernism as a commodity with various user groups draws attention to the fact that it can be simultaneously liberating and conservatizing; as Linda Hutcheon points out, it is not unlike “writing *sous rature*: it makes you want to have your historical referent and erase it too” (Poetics 145). I believe that we have an example in the success of the word postmodernism of theory provoking culture. Specifically, in the 1980s the historical reinvention of the word postmodernism (it is indeed not, as Jameson claimed, a neologism), the theorizing of the break or *coupure*, and the cultured stylization of philosophical postmodernism all belie the polemical arguments made on behalf of the postmodern condition, both those popularized, ostensibly liberating arguments about stylistic freedom, as well as the more academic, conservatizing

ones about waning of affect or loss of history. To take but a few examples which give the lie to postmodernist claims of a new kind of historical deafness or refusal of history, we can consider novels such as Toni Morrison's Beloved (1986), Susan Daitch's L.C. (1986), and Art Spiegelman's Maus (1986, 1991). Each of these texts is commonly labeled postmodernist, and indeed Maus and Beloved are even held up as exemplary in this respect. Each is built upon a direct interrogation of the problem of rectifying theoretical postmodernism's claims about the inaccessibility of History with the author's own personal history or histories. These novels can be categorized as postmodern because they experiment formally with tone and genre--Maus mixing high and low culture (and forms), Beloved utilizing the ghost/gothic genre, L.C. a Nabokovian series of manuscripts--but ultimately the postmodern label fails in that there is not the least trace of ironic distance to history, playful boredom, or flattened, affectless tone. Those strategies may be possible with other people's histories, but L.C., Maus, Beloved (and others like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee [1982] and Maxine Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book [1989]) each must come back to their own characters' central historical tragedy in a manner that precludes the supposed distancing effect.

Conceiving postmodernism as both a confusion of the personal with history, and as a kind of technique or strategy for dealing with this problem, we can see that this provocation *by* the word postmodern and the discourse in response to that provocation results in three distinct ways of handling this new technique of postmodernism, which I will return to in future chapters: 1) the development of a new style of youthfulness (codified by the "Brat Packs"), 2) a strategy for the circumvention of postmodern history (a type of historical dodge exemplified in debates surrounding surrogate motherhood), and 3) the populist expression of a fear of a truly postmodern subject (yuppies). In order to

prepare for these later chapters, I would like to spend a moment on the second of the above--the “historical dodge”--which works best to illustrate the problems inherent in a postmodern attempt to periodize the present. For example, there is the sense expressed by Umberto Eco, who in “Correspondence on Postmodernism” remarks that “every age reaches moments of crisis like those described by Nietzsche in the second of the Untimely Considerations, on the harmfulness of the study of history. The sense that the past is restricting, smothering, blackmailing us.” Likewise, Gianni Vattimo, discussed below, similarly raises Nietzsche’s concept of “historical sickness”: “this excess of historical consciousness prevents nineteenth-century European civilization from developing a specific style of its own” (165). Like a history *sous rature*, the “historical dodge” involves the development and prehistory of the word “postmodernism” by later critics. “Postmodernism” is a word which manages to evoke and deny its history in one phrase, and present postmodern effects likewise stand in isolated relation to the past and future.

Whatever one may mean by “modern” (and here is the bulk of the disagreement over the postmodern), the prefix “post” certainly seems to be a more stable signifier, indicating clearly the key constitutive element and question of postmodernism: the break or *coupure*. Signifying as it does by its prefix some sort of new present “after,” discussions of postmodernism tend to be especially implicated in discussions of history; the prefix “post” points, inherently, towards the past, although postmodernism is so often viewed as being a moment of the present, or future present. For these reasons, it is a trope among critics of the “postmodern” to first offer an origin story--an etymological note on the post- of postmodernism; generally, the portmanteau nature of the word offers a way of situating one critic from another (i.e., is “post” more important than “modern”

and does it mean “after” or “beyond,” is the word hyphenated, are parts capitalized, etc.).¹⁹ In these textual moments, for the most part glossed over or consigned to introductory statements, there is a varying attitude towards history and the neologicist; these authors are using a word with a historical record (that is, *not* a neologism of their own invention), but each also feels that they are using it in a new way unrelated to prior use. This oppositional stance legitimizes their project in the use of a word that has a narrative history, while simultaneously disavowing the word’s etymological history.

These origin stories or birth narratives tend to operate in one of two ways: offering fully historical readings as part of their argument (as is commonly the case with those critics who “disagree” with the postmodern), or instead quickly gesturing towards their central term’s prior use. For the former group, including such critics as Jürgen Habermas and Alex Callinicos, historical arguments about the etymological history of postmodernism, and its relation to modernity, are key to correcting other critics’ mistakes; by arguing “what” is or is not “post” about “modernism,” these critics seek to show that in fact the postmodern does not exist, or does not exist as such. These critiques tend to be both reactionary and farther reaching in their historical vision, tracing the putative origins of the postmodern to what they argue are the true origins of modernity. The second group of critics is characterized by their avoidance of a fully developed origin story; for example, David Harvey claims, “I cannot remember exactly when I first encountered the term postmodernism,” which he hoped would “lose its allure” (viii). These kinds of throwaway references to the prior use of the word

¹⁹ Some of these variant spellings and parts of speech: “post-modern,” “post modern,” “Post Modern,” “POSTmodernISM.” Consider also distinctions made between different forms--noun, adjective, verbal noun--postmodern, postmodernism, postmodernity. As an aside, I could not successfully construct a history of what I assumed was the later variant “pomo.” An 11 July 1982 *Newsweek* article “The Yakuza Connection” has a baffling reference to the yakuza “obtaining pomo videocassettes” for smuggling purposes, but surely this is a misprint for “porno”--another interesting lineage in light of Jameson’s “kinky bedfellows.”

postmodern are most intriguing, and show how postmodern theorists dislocate their subjects' present moment from a historical continuity.

The discrepancies between various critics' origin stories were soon addressed; if one could pinpoint the modern, and the earliest uses of "postmodern," perhaps one could lay to rest some of the dispute over the supposed break between the two movements. The most extensive dating of postmodernism as a historical category has been done by such literary historians as Hans Bertens, Douwe Fokkema, Margaret A. Rose, and, in German, Wolfgang Iser and Michael Koehler. Bertens, in Approaching Postmodernism, a collection of papers delivered in 1984, provides a thorough historical survey of the term "postmodern," focusing on Charles Olson's use of the term, and later uses by Randall Jarrell (1946) and John Berryman (1948), in order to demonstrate how, for critics like Irving Howe and Harry Levin, postmodernism "is essentially a phenomenon of the American 50s" ("Postmodern *Weltanschauung*" 13). Next, Leslie Fielder and Susan Sontag represent a counter-version of postmodernism in the 60s that is more anti-modernist. Finally, Bertens, after moving through other various formulations of postmodernism, finds that "in the 1970s Postmodernism became more and more an inclusive term that gathered to itself all literary and cultural phenomena that could not be classified as either Realist or Modernist" ("Postmodern *Weltanschauung*" 25). Bertens expanded upon his initial overview of the use of postmodernism in The Idea of the Postmodern: A History, looking more closely at the way in which the word had differing meanings for various disciplines such as literature, dance, or photography (see also Postmodern Theory by Best and Kellner which performs a similar operation). "Postmodernism," Bertens writes, "has meant differing things to different people at different conceptual levels, rising from humble literary-critical origins in the 1950s to a

level of global conceptualization in the 1980s” (The Idea of the Postmodern 10). This “global conceptualization” caused by the increasing inclusivity of the term postmodernism may render the word more useful to a wider variety of disciplines, but it does so at the expense of any sort of rigor or precision. Margaret A. Rose, in The Post-modern and the Post-Industrial, thoroughly critiques such often-tangled misuses of the term, using the hoariest way of solving the problem of origins: going to the dictionary. Starting in her first chapter, “Defining the Post-modern,” with the Oxford English Dictionary’s (OED) 1982 supplement, she thoroughly examines the OED’s citations, which she views as misleading on a number of key points. While Rose wants to sort out the various meanings of the central term, I intend to investigate the effect of this inclusive sharing of the word postmodern.

The Oxford English Dictionary predates Bertens’ and Fokkema’s origin stories (and apparently also Koehler and Welsch’s); its first recorded use of “postmodern” as an adjective²⁰ is from 1949, used in J. Hudnut’s Architecture and the Spirit of Man. Hudnut’s book includes a section called “Post-modern house,” and this sentence, cited by the OED: “He shall be a modern owner, a post-modern owner, if such a thing is conceivable. Free from all sentimentality, fantasy, or caprice.” Hudnut’s throwaway definition of the unsentimental postmodern subject--one who owns freely, without illusion--seems in hindsight to precisely describe an 80s yuppie condo-buyer, yet one would be hard-pressed to find, among the later critics of the postmodern, one to agree that postmodern subjects lack a relationship with fantasy, or caprice, or sentimentality’s sister nostalgia; these in fact are supposedly some of postmodernism’s constitutive features. What Hudnut centrally expresses, though, is the idea that the man [sic] who

²⁰ “postmodernism” as a noun: 1979, “postmodernist” as a noun: 1966, “postmodernist” as an adjective: 1965

comes after modern man will be quite different; through the cultural expression of his home ownership, through the type of home he purchases, he will be able to distinguish himself from his neighbors. This kind of post-modern man is one who can make himself postmodern if he so desires; as opposed to the later idea that postmodernism stems from a break in the past, something that has already happened to someone.

Two more things are noteworthy about Hudnut's statement; the first is his reservation: "if such a thing is conceivable." Now, a "post-modern owner" is certainly conceivable (Hudnut, after all, conceived of it), but it also inconceivable in another sense. Grammatically, Hudnut's sentence equates the modern and post-modern owner; it is only by the following tacked-on, incomplete sentence, coupled with the qualification of his neologism, that the post-modern subject is defined. Following this origin story, the post-modern subject's founding moment is a double one of desire and deception. The difference between the modern subject and the postmodern one is based on the reader's permissiveness (that is, of the conceivability of the idea of a "post-modern"). Hudnut's sentence lines the two up neatly, separated by a mere comma, until his desire (if that is conceivable) splits the modern subject apart; so long as he does not tax the bounds of conceivability, the post-modern subject is here conceived.

The other point to make is that the male post-modern subject is first and foremost a post-modern owner, a post-modern user. Now, Hudnut's 1949 use of "post-modern" as an adjective reflects the other initial citations the OED gives for the word, until Frank Kermode, in 1966, changes from the "post-modern" period (or man or age) to, simply, the "post-modernists." The shift from an adjective and its qualification of a historical period or subject of history to a noun mirrors the shift in the discourse of subjectivity prompted by the "death of the universal subject" during which Kermode was writing. In other

words, it makes some sense for people to then stop talking about postmodern man or postmodern ages, and to instead shift to a more seemingly unitary formulation (a whole population of postmodernists). However, moving from a way of describing post-modern things to a way of being (a “post-modernist”) sounds suspiciously like a reversal of the supposed shift from ontology to epistemology. The post-modernist is you; no longer distinct from your modern neighbor, you are now both postmodernists. This shifts back again with those who use the term “post-modernism.” Now the way of being is dominated by something external--no longer part of one’s self-definition, no longer a full-time subject position, “post-modernism,” externalized, is something that acts upon the subject, or something with which the subject must grapple.

There is one significant problem with this reading of the first usage of the adjective “post-modern”: it is not the first usage. There is, indeed, an entire prehistory to the word “post-modern” and its variants, uncovered by linguist Fred R. Shapiro’s recent work with electronic storage databases like JSTOR, which he uses to antedate words. Shapiro has no special interest in postmodernism, but uses it for its exemplary status as “the leading fad and buzzword of contemporary humanistic activity” (“Prehistory” 331). Writing in 2001, Shapiro proves his point about the varying usages of the word postmodernism by demonstrating that these earlier uses are not reactions to modern art or architecture, (as is suggested, for example, in Hal Foster’s influential collection The Anti-Aesthetic and by Jameson’s Postmodernism), but rather come predominantly from religious writings (“Prehistory” 332). Shapiro shows that early appearances of the word postmodern share little or nothing in common with later uses. Ironically, however, religion is precisely the subject of a large majority of contemporary books on postmodernism (an unscientific search for “postmodernism” on www.amazon.com, for example, shows that a third of the

first dozen entries are books on postmodernism and religion). Admittedly Shapiro is a layman whose expertise lies in linguistics, but the structure of his argument, including the disavowal of specific conjunctions of postmodernism with other disciplines, in fact shares much with 70s and 80s critics of postmodernism such as Jameson. Simply put, Shapiro's short piece encapsulates the two forms of origin stories discussed above: there is an objective historical record with cultural value, but there is also an argument against this record's value, showing and simultaneously disavowing the importance of the word's prehistory. Shapiro's piece, in both his method and the research he uncovers, shares some of the central features of later 80s self-definitions of the postmodern: the futuristic mixture with fantasy, a partially unrecoverable or mysterious prior history, and a counterintuitively conservative (religious) impulse.

The earliest use of "postmodern" as an adjective that Shapiro finds is from 1929 in a pamphlet called "The Thermoelectric Formula: X Minus Y Equals Z," published as the first of a "Post-Modern Scientific Thought Series" ("Prehistory" 332). By pointing out that it is "impossible to fathom" what the author Lucien Victor Alexis may have meant by the word,²¹ Shapiro demonstrates the sense of fantasy that is shared by later critics like Jean Baudrillard. The next issue published by Post-Modern Scientific Thought, written by Alexis, is entitled "The Riddle of the Magnetic Field"; the Tom Swift-like (1910-1941) quality of the titles of these pamphlets (and Shapiro's and our inability to "fathom" them) gives us the sense that it almost does not matter what "postmodern" here means--the word itself nonetheless signifies a profound sense of advancement. The sense of the postmodern as harbinger of the future (that is, the emphasis on the "post") is also echoed in the earlier uses of postmodernism and

²¹ Some of this is because Shapiro did not actually see the pamphlet; "only a single copy appears to exist in any library, that residing at the New Orleans Public Library" ("Prehistory" 332).

postmodernist (as noun) that Shapiro found. In these instances, however, they refer not to fantastic quasi-futuristic science, but rather to a re-conservativizing theological impulse. Reacting against “a progressive, predominantly Catholic theological movement of the early twentieth century” (Shapiro, “Prehistory” 332), J.M. Thompson writes in a 1914 publication called Hibbert Journal, (“A Quarterly Review of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy,” reminding us of the intertwining of the three at the beginning of the century), that “the Post-Modernist is trying to find a scheme of forms which shall express the real and directly felt values of spiritual things, not perverted and obscured by their conventional embodiments” (qtd. in Shapiro, “Prehistory” 333); the post-modernist will actually move beyond the caprices of religious modernism (which is another way of saying newfangled religion). Rather than represent a radical future, this viewpoint sees the present as being on the wrong track and Thompson’s post-modernist is one struggling to restore us. This is the dystopic, religious version or vision of Post-Modern Scientific Thought’s quasi-scientific utopia which is later repeated in some of Baudrillard’s more ecstatic writings. Putting it along these lines illustrates one way in which the fantastic (with its promise of a better tomorrow, or threat of an errant present) can get caught up with the conservative.²²

This point is made more clearly by the most interesting of the antedated postmodernist texts, Postmodernism and Other Essays (how could Bertens or Fokkema have missed such a work?). Published in 1926, Bernard I. Bell makes an argument for the application of postmodernism to religion that may sound odd to contemporary students of the postmodern: “Postmodernism will frankly admit the possibility of miracles. . . . Postmodernism will readily and gladly acknowledge . . . the Incarnation. . . . The

²² Consider too, for example, a postmodern critic like Baudrillard or Kroker’s insistence on the “ecstasy” or “frenzy” of 80s postmodernism; the rapture of culture replaces the rapture of religion.

Postmodernist looks with more approval upon Roman Catholicism than he does upon current Protestantism” (qtd. in Shapiro, “Prehistory” 333). With their religious focus, such proclamations may appear to be far removed from later definitions of postmodernism; however, stripped of its manifest content, Bell expresses strikingly contemporary ideas. He writes, “Modernism has ceased to be modern. We are ready for some sort of Postmodernism” (qtd. in Shapiro, “Prehistory” 333), and we can see in this yearning a sense of desperation; since the modern has failed to be what it purports to be, since the definition of the word “modern” no longer seems to fit the cultural form of “modernism,” Bell desires something different, without any necessary sense of what might replace the present. Recall Hudnut’s qualification: “if such a thing is conceivable.” If there is not a ready definition of the postmodern to replace the modern with, if we see in this postmodern prehistory a debunked origin story about modernism, then indeed we may agree with Jameson’s own anxiety that “postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility” (Postmodernism ix).

Jameson, in his introduction to Postmodernism, situates postmodernism as both the fruition of a historical development and also a present, contemporary intervention. It is difficult to imagine a less convincing argument for postmodernism than that it may “amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility.” Yet, for Jameson, postmodernism has, to switch from the bedfellows metaphor, an insidious, diseased quality about it; if it creates itself by theorizing itself (a disembodied *cogito ergo sum?*), then it continues to live through this cancerous theorizing. For example, commenting on how narrative returns as “the narrative of the end of narratives” (what Baudrillard calls “the end of endism” [“Pataphysics of the Year 2000”]), Jameson sees as

another feature of postmodernism the fact that “virtually any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very search for the present itself and pressed into service as a symptom and an index of the deeper logic of the postmodern, which imperceptibly turns into its own theory and the theory of itself” (Postmodernism xii). This dialectic, “where the symptom has become its own disease (and vice versa, no doubt)” (Postmodernism xii), is characteristic of Jameson’s clinical stance. The medical infects his argument throughout the introduction; for example, he summarizes postmodern theory as “the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments” (Postmodernism xi). Speaking of the failed promise of a “whole new culture to come to birth,” Jameson remarks on “the delirium of some of its celebrants and apologists (whose euphoria, however, is an interesting historical symptom in its own right)” (Postmodernism xii). The rebirth symptoms are later more specifically identified with a disease--schizophrenia--with its “pathology distinctly referential” (Postmodernism xii). Jameson’s viral and medical metaphors are not necessarily sustained themes in his critique, but they do share with the earliest pre-postmodernists something of the awe of science and fear of the doctor. Jameson’s postmodern symptom or disease, like the chicken and her egg, is best described as a self-cannibalizing virus, a sort of play for immortality enmeshed in its own question. In this, Jameson’s description of postmodernism matches his initial, overarching definition, which centers around history and narrative, and focuses the debates over postmodernism around the notion of the break or *coupure*.

II. Jameson / *Coupure* / Lyotard

More than any other aspect of postmodernism, the concept of an epistemological break or rupture is the most telling expression of a cultural anxiety in the 1980s, and most

clearly raises the problem of an ethical response to postmodernism. Let me elaborate that now. The break figures prominently in a majority of theoretical discussions of postmodernism because it involves past (history), present (politics), and future (ethics). Jameson, in the early essays and chapters of Postmodernism, is concerned most with dealing with the break, although that is not how he begins his text. The 1990 introduction, in fact, begins not with the break but with what the break may signify in practice; he tentatively starts with this sentence: “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). It is an amusing feature of Jameson’s style and stylistic position as *auteur* of postmodernism (with something of the doctor, as we have seen) that he “safely” eases his readership in gently not with the problem of the foundational, totalizing moment of postmodernism (the before and after of the post-), but with the aftereffects, or state of affairs, of late twentieth century life--the age that forgot the thought of history. This safe introduction, however, is not the starting point for Jameson’s own thought; in his first program essay on postmodernism, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” printed earlier in 1984 and reworked here as the lead chapter, he begins directly by taking “the temperature of the age.” The first paragraph reads:

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the “crisis” of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some

radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s. (Postmodernism 1)

Again we see in Jameson's postmodernism the contradictory, inverted dialectic of thinking about history; instead of the expected prospectus of the future, we have a retrospectus of the past. Yet, the argument continues, the focus is not on the past, but on the passing of the past. The existence of postmodernism, itself in evidence not a thing so much as the mourning of a thing, depends upon a break or cut whose radicality precludes any sort of return (and Jameson returns repeatedly to this point when he elaborates upon the pastiche/parody distinction and the compulsions of nostalgia).

In the following, much longer paragraph, Jameson enumerates an "empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous" list of what follows after the "high-modernist impulse," which marks either the death throes or senility of the "what came before" (my phrase). His list includes specific figures such as Andy Warhol, John Cage, Philip Glass, Jean-Luc Godard, and Thomas Pynchon, as well as categories like new wave music, the commercial film, and photorealism.²³ In a diagnostic moment, Jameson poses to himself another formulation of the problem he began with; does such an "indefinite" list "imply any more fundamental change or break than the periodic style and fashion changes determined by an older high-modernist imperative of stylistic innovation" (Postmodernism 1-2)? This is the position some take in response to Jameson; that the high-modernist imperative of "make it new" results in cultural examples that look distinct from modernism, but are really still operating under its rubric. In the 1984 essay Jameson manages to have it both ways, arguing that, even were "the constitutive features of postmodernism . . . identical

²³ Compare Lyotard's list-making in the second paragraph of The Postmodern Condition: cybernetics, informatics, telematics, paradoxology (3-4) and the list of "the tenor of the times" that begins The Postmodern Explained: art historians, art critics, architects, philosophers, historians, teatrologists, and (unable to resist naming him) Jürgen Habermas.

with and coterminous to those of an older modernism” (and Jameson does not believe so) they would nonetheless “remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function” due to a more complex argument about the positioning of postmodernism and global capital (Postmodernism 5).

In these initial two paragraphs Jameson makes clear a number of things which will frame later discussions of postmodernism and the break. First is Jameson’s starting point--the collection of these essays into a book marks Postmodernism as both a theoretical work tied to a longer tradition of Marxist criticism and a work of “present history,” beginning with the “last few years.” The “inverted millenarianism” that Jameson speaks of (a millenarianism shared by fellow Marxist Raymond Williams) on its surface appears to gesture towards a populist conception of American 80s consciousness, and Jameson explicitly returns to what he refers to as revolutionary changes (“news of . . . a whole new type of society, most famously baptized ‘postindustrial society’ [Daniel Bell] but often also designated consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or high tech, and the like” [Postmodernism 3]) and what I have been calling liberatory strategies.²⁴ In this, Jameson’s initial version of postmodernism is anticipatory. Although his following chapters take up specific examples of the codevelopment of postmodernism and the “cultural logic” of capitalism, beginning here with the proposed break and the end it signals serves to create a sort of clean tablet, a cause for the future. The “inverted millenarianism” of which he speaks means not that the end is near, but rather that the end is here (indeed, just past). By bracketing the catastrophic or redemptive (this postmodernism is not inherently “for” or “against” any particular group), Jameson replaces the anticipation of fin-de-siècle global changes which come regularly but rarely, and starts us off with the feeling that what the millennium

²⁴ Even Lyotard speaks positively of the “society of the future” (Postmodern Condition xxiv).

promises may have already happened; it is in this sense that Jameson is writing history for the future. Finally, by beginning with the question of the break, which he poses and abstains from answering, the reader is set up for the key role that the break will play in future discussions of the postmodern. Jameson's inaugural discussion puts the *coupure* squarely as the key constitutive starting point, for without a break, how could there be a postmodernism?

Jameson does try to find a way out of a totalizing conception of a before and after strategy of the periodizing hypothesis. Midway through the 1990 introduction (and, I suspect, thinking of his introduction to Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition), Jameson considers the problem of speaking the unspeakable. His critique of Lyotard follows these lines: how can one enunciate a narrative of the end of narrative, which would demonstrate the "return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos" (Postmodernism xii)? Or, how can we have postmodernism as "a periodizing hypothesis, and that at a moment in which the very conception of historical periodization has come to seem most problematical" (Postmodernism 3)? Rather than solve this problem, Jameson is content to mark it as yet another ineluctable feature of the periodizing hypothesis of postmodernism, which nonetheless gets "nominated" post facto by the word postmodernism, and by the question of the break:

The decision as to whether one faces a break or a continuity--whether the present is to be seen as a historical originality or as the simple prolongation of more of the same . . . is itself the inaugural narrative act that grounds the perception and interpretation of the events to be narrated. . . . I have pretended to believe that the postmodern . . . constitutes a cultural and experiential break worth exploring in greater detail. . . . For the name itself--postmodernism--has crystallized a host of

hitherto independent developments which, thus named, prove to have contained the thing itself in embryo. . . . It thus turns out that it is not only in love, cratylism, and botany that the supreme act of nomination wields a material impact. (Postmodernism xii-xiii)

The nomination of postmodernism, father to the embryos of developing culture, has a remarkably Aristotelian turn in its “material impact”; Jameson’s “supreme act” of cratylistic²⁵ nomination engenders culture. While he may only “pretend” to believe in the postmodern *coupure*, he appears to take great pleasure in the material impact of this pretense. He turns to the second person: “the appeal to experience . . . now recovers a certain authority as what, in retrospect, the new name allowed you to think you felt, because you now have something to call it that other people seem to acknowledge by themselves using the word” (Postmodernism xiii). The shift to the second person is all the more telling considering Jameson’s position as one of the foremost of the “other people” who acknowledge the word, and thereby legitimate “your” use of it. Since you now have something to call it, thanks to Jameson’s “supreme act of nomination,” you can now understand yourself and your own present day. This is only one example of what Jacques Derrida labeled “phallogocentrism,” and of the way that the complicated arguments about postmodernism--it may not exist, but we nonetheless must use it (“for good or ill, we cannot *not* use it” [Postmodernism xxii]) work to paradoxically conservatize and liberate. Jameson’s nomination, making a stance towards postmodernism inevitable, is inextricably tied to the way you behave and shall behave, and for this reason alone remains particularly suspect.

Consider, for example, how Lyotard introduces the term in The Postmodern

²⁵ “Cratylism,” after the Greek figure Cratylus, is not yet a word in English. I parse it as not distinguishing words from the things they describe. Lyotard also mentions Cratylus in The Differend (37).

Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979, translated 1984).²⁶

The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe that condition. The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives. (Postmodern Condition xxiii)

Lyotard's decision to call this condition of knowledge "postmodern" seems indicated mostly by American fashion, but Lyotard is in a tough position, for (as Jameson points out),²⁷ he has the difficult task of narrating the end of narratives. Jameson, in his foreword to The Postmodern Condition, takes a swipe at Lyotard: "meanwhile," he writes,

the title of the book, with its fashionable theme of postmodernism provocatively in evidence, opens up this subject matter, at least by implication, in the directions of aesthetics and economics, since postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a

²⁶ This late translation introduced Lyotard's work to America ahead of some of his earlier texts, such as Just Gaming.

²⁷ "Lyotard's insistence on *narrative analysis* in a situation in which the narratives themselves henceforth seem impossible is his declaration of intent to remain political and contestatory" (Jameson, foreword to Postmodern Condition xx). To which we can imagine Lyotard responding:

Are "we" not telling, whether bitterly or gladly, the great narrative of the end of great narratives? For thought to remain modern, doesn't it suffice that it think in terms of the end of some history? Or, is postmodernity the pastime of an old man who scrounges in the garbage-heap of finality looking for leftovers, non-senses, or paradoxes, and who turns this into the glory of his novelty, into his promise of change? (Differend 135-6).

And, earlier, "If this is the case [that 'recourse to narrative is inevitable'], it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history understood, as outlined above--not as a need to remember or to project (a need for historicity, for accent), but on the contrary as a need to forget (a need for *metrum*)" (Postmodern Condition 28). Or, "'postmodern' is probably a very bad term because it conveys the idea of a historical 'periodization.' 'Periodizing', however, is still a 'classic or 'modern' ideal. 'Postmodern' simply indicates a mood, or better a state of mind" ("Rules and Paradoxes" 209).

rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured. (vii)

To what extent does Jameson himself not constitute “the fashionable theme” on display here by his own foreword? Jameson later continues,

thus, although he has polemically endorsed the slogan of a ‘postmodernism’ and has been involved in the defense of some of its more controversial productions, Lyotard is in reality quite unwilling to posit a postmodernist stage radically different from the period of high modernism and involving a fundamental historical and cultural break with this last. (xvi)

Wlad Godzich, in an afterword to The Postmodern Explained (1988, translated 1992), disagrees, and rises to Lyotard’s defense, claiming that “theoretician of the postmodern [was] a title thrust on [Lyotard] and certainly not self-imposed” (112). About that latter book’s presumably still “fashionably provocative” title, Godzich writes that “the title of the book has suggested to some a prank and perhaps even some impatience with the tenor of the debate that has raged around the notion of the postmodern. It is dead earnest and nothing if not patient” (109). Overall, one gets the impression that Lyotard uses the “postmodern” merely out of convenience. Nearly everything else he wrote is about language, about Wittgenstein’s project, or about Kafka or Joyce or modernity. If it is fair to say that Lyotard was reluctant about being associated with the postmodern, it is so not because Lyotard changed his mind, or disavowed his earlier book, but because his forays into the postmodern always seemed to be occasional texts in the first place. Setting aside The Postmodern Condition, written at the request of Quebec’s Conseil des Universités, his other explicitly postmodern works are The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985, in whose introduction the translators recount the difficulty of convincing

Lyotard to publish these letters, and Postmodern Fables, whose own introduction by Lyotard resignedly throws its hands in the air: “futility suits the postmodern . . . [b]ut that doesn’t keep us from asking questions” (vii). Towards the Postmodern, a collection of essays by Lyotard, turns out to be simply pre-postmodern, essays which perhaps gesture or indicate towards the postmodern, but certainly do not move towards it. None of these texts retain the authority of Lyotard’s “report on knowledge,” but even there we saw his uncomfortability with the word.

But, to return to Jameson’s most lasting criticism, that Lyotard meta-narratively critiques narrative unwittingly. Later is Lyotard’s famous one-sentence summary (he has just spent some twenty lines explicating the term “modern”): “simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Postmodern Condition xxiv). These narratives are of the objective, scientific type, but as he proves, one cannot judge the validity of “narrative knowledge” by means of “scientific knowledge” and vice versa. “Lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative. Such a reaction does not necessarily follow” (Postmodern Condition 26). But, Lyotard continues, “most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction” (Postmodern Condition 41). These language games, which Lyotard proposes should be taught instead of mere language content (Postmodern Condition 50), appear to represent a hopeful possibility for the postmodern age (although “our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx” [Postmodern Condition xxiv]). For Lyotard, the postmodern opens up strategies which are readily put at the service of a

sinister agenda, albeit strategies that are hopelessly entangled in contradiction, and thus perhaps still useful. Yet, this is not an entry point for intervention, for the “problem” also problematizes its solution; as in Jameson’s viral metaphor, the inconsistencies that would offer “a good ethico-political end” (Postmodern Condition xxiv), also subvert such ends. Jameson and Lyotard then seem to agree upon the implacability of postmodernism--there is nothing but to face it. This recalls some of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s position regarding their notion of freedom and lines-of-flight; “freedom” is not based on academic knowledge, but on a floating-between, a transversal movement of language games: “no one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (Postmodern Condition 15).²⁸ The question is no longer ‘is it true?’ but ‘what use is it?’ (Postmodern Condition 51). Likewise, postmodern science produces not the known, but the unknown (Postmodern Condition 61); this is yet another move that means to displace and to create more displacements in narrative, but hopefully allows for a microethics of narrative, as opposed to a totalizing position. As Lyotard playfully put it in Postmodern Fables (1993): “you’re not done living because you chalk it up to artifice” (vii).

III. The Event as Break: Derrida/Baudrillard

For later critics, Jameson’s discussion of the break marks one way of separating postmodern critiques into two camps--those who see postmodernism as an aesthetics that can be traced throughout history (such as Habermas and Anthony Giddens, or the claim that Tristram Shandy, Cervantes, and Montaigne are postmodernist), and those

²⁸ This seems a dubious claim, and although I am not aware of any specific critiques, one clearly exists, despite Lyotard’s statement in the first sentence that his text is about “the most highly developed societies” and that his key term originates on “the American continent” (Postmodern Condition xxiii). Jameson, in the initial sentence of his foreword to The Postmodern Condition, labels the text “seemingly neutral” (Postmodern Condition vii).

who see postmodernity as a historical or cultural moment against which to react (Jameson, David Harvey, Andreas Huyssen) coming at a specific point in time and representing a specific cultural-historical period.²⁹ Jameson's attitude towards the post-break present is in keeping with his self-identification as "a relatively enthusiastic consumer of the postmodern" (Postmodernism 298). On the other hand there is someone like Jean Baudrillard, who claims, "I always kept my distance from culture--as well as from theory. I maintained a position of distrust and rejection. . . . I don't want culture; I spit on it" (Forget Foucault 81). These examples of cultural attitudes are quite important in terms of feelings about the break, and they get mixed up with a conception of the event (usually catastrophic, not redemptive). Critics such as Baudrillard, Arthur Kroker, and David Cook go so far as to see postmodernism's break as a "radical discontinuity," something excessively foreign or strange, while those who argue against the break find ways to paper over the gaps their contemporaries illustrate, stressing the similarities between so-called postmodernism and modernism; for example, Habermas' most persistent point is that postmodernity is a misinterpretation of "the incomplete project of modernity," and that the break has yet to occur.

In his introduction to Jürgen Habermas's The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate (1985, 1987), Richard Wolin takes the "pro-break" postmodernists to task, agreeing that they

have been correctly characterized by Habermas as "young conservatives" insofar as they have abandoned any hopes of conscious social change. Indeed, the word "emancipation" seems to have been stricken from their vocabulary. Instead, their aestheticist perspective is content to fall behind the achievements of modernity, a standpoint Habermas likens to "throwing out the baby with the bathwater." (xxv)

²⁹ Marianne DeKoven successfully outlines this basic distinction.

Habermas, for our purposes, is most important for his refusal of the break, and his persistent questioning of the contemporary imperative and fascination with such a break; “those who use this ‘post’ want to set themselves apart from a past; they cannot yet give a new name to the present, since we do not yet have answers for the identifiable problems of the future. . . . Such gestures of hasty dismissal are suited to periods of transition” (New Conservatism 3). To be more specific, Habermas’ problem with the “post-” is not unlike the flip side of Jameson’s identification of the new term as some sort of materialist lightning rod;³⁰ Habermas finds that “the prefix that we encounter in such terms for tendencies and points of view does not always have the same meaning. Common to the -isms formed with the prefix ‘post’ is the sense of *standing back* from something. They express an experience of discontinuity but take different attitudes toward the past that is put at a distance” (New Conservatism 4). Instead, “post” means simply that things have “developed further,” that they are coming to their logical conclusions, but not necessarily the same or similar ones that are identified or warned against by other “postmodernists.”³¹ If Habermas seems to be a stickler, it is due to his fear, shared by others like Lyotard, that there is a shoddiness in contemporary theory, which in its excitement over the present moment may be ignoring significant evidence of a larger continuity with the past. Habermas’s question in the lectures of The New Conservatism concerns the problems and habits inherent when people consider, think, or philosophize the present moment, and especially the need for and manner in which they first must make a theory of (or out of) history. Especially interesting is the way he attributes desire to the postmodernists, who

³⁰ Postmodernism, “like lightning striking from the superstructure back to the base, fuses its unlikely materials into a gleaming lump or lava surface” (Postmodernism xiii).

³¹ Habermas’ own “origin story” is telling about his attitude: “at first the expression ‘postmodern,’ as it was applied in America during the 1950s and 1960s to literary trends . . . was also used merely to designate new variants within the broad spectrum of late modernism. ‘Postmodernism’ became an emotionally loaded outright political battle cry only in the 1970s, when two opposing camps seized the expression: on the one side the *neoconservatives* . . . and on the other side the radical *critics of growth*” (The New Conservatism 4).

“want to set themselves apart from a past.” This is undoubtedly part of the postmodernists’ obsessive refusal of history, and raises yet again the question of the effects of postmodernism’s periodizing hypothesis.

Anthony Giddens, in The Consequences of Modernity (1990) shares some of Habermas’s concern with slowing down a rampantly irresponsible postmodern theory. His key claim is that “rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalized than before” (3). While Habermas may have objected to postmodern theorists on the principle of their historical blindness, Giddens, as ominously signaled by his title, is more concerned with a misrepresentation of the deleterious effects of contemporary culture: “the world in which we live today is a fraught and dangerous one. This has served to do more than simply blunt . . . the assumption that the emergence of modernity would lead to the formation of a happier and more secure social order” (10).³² Echoing Derrida and Nuclear Criticism (see below), Giddens considers the listing of contemporary disasters (including such “relatively small-scale events [as] the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki”--events presumably not small for residents of those cities); he finds “the risks involved are necessarily ‘unreal,’ because we could only have clear demonstration of them if events occurred that are too terrible to contemplate” (134). Giddens also agrees with Habermas that postmodernism is really about aesthetics more than anything else; “post-modernism, if it means anything, is best kept to refer to styles or movements within literature, painting, the plastic arts, and architecture. It concerns aspects of *aesthetic reflection* upon the nature of modernity” (45). Carolyn

³² “Modernity, as everyone living in the closing years of the twentieth century can see, is a double-edged phenomenon. The development of modern social institutions and their worldwide spread have created vastly greater opportunities for human beings to enjoy a secure and rewarding existence than any type of pre-modern system. But modernity also has a sombre side, which has become very apparent in the present century” (Giddens 7).

See's interesting novel Golden Days (1987) is worth mentioning, as it offers an example of these two strains; it is a post-apocalyptic, "unreal" novel that aestheticizes the post-break by means of the remnants of the pre-break. Diamond specialist Edith Langley starts her life over again in California, where she befriends televangelist Lorna Villanelle. The two become close and successful friends in sunny Los Angeles, living the clichéd 80s paradise, until nuclear war breaks out (the cover shows a champagne cork's pop resulting in a mushroom cloud). See, focusing on the women's adaptability, handles the nuclear event lightly; the men, after all, started it, and while they continue to be afraid and tell tales of the apocalypse, the women, the "hardy laughers, mystics, crazies, who knew their real homes" (196) manage to live on to see the Light ages. See implicitly critiques the logic of the total nuclear event that Giddens expresses, finding instead a dual unreality to life before and after the event.

Giddens himself speaks briefly of another of these texts which considers the interlaced problem of the postmodern periodizing hypothesis and the imagination of disaster--Raymond Williams's Towards 2000 (1983). Giddens reads in Williams's notion of a new kind of politics called "Plan X" "the belief that much that goes on in the modern world is outside anyone's control, so that temporary gains are all that can be planned or hoped for" (135). In Towards 2000, Williams revisits his 1959 essay forecasting what Britain would look like in the 60s, and he envisions a tactical approach to the problems of the present era:

a new hard line on the future: a new politics of strategic advantage. . . . I call this new politics "Plan X" . . . it is different from other kinds of planning, and from all other important ways of thinking about the future, in that its objective is indeed "X": a willed and deliberate unknown, in which the only defining factor is

advantage. . . . [W]hat is new in “Plan X” politics is that it has genuinely incorporated a reading of the future, and one which is quite as deeply pessimistic, in general terms, as the most extreme readings of those who are now campaigning against the nuclear arms race or the extending damage of the ecological crisis. The difference of “Plan X” people is that they do not believe that any of these dangerous developments can be halted or turned back. (243-4)

Williams’s Plan X is like a proleptic response to the unknown of the rupturing event, a way to contain or manage the political implications of the absolute unknown of Giddens’s “unreal” events, which are beyond contemplation and thus beyond responsible response. The extreme pessimism of Plan X stands as a marker of the times for Williams, and for him it is explicitly a form of thinking different from any other way of “thinking about the future.” What we have seen so far, though, is that this thinking about the future is invariably a thinking of the present. To be one of the “Plan X’ people” involves imagining a pessimistic and anticipatory model of the irrecuperability of the disastrous future event. The “Plan X’ people” live the finality of Jameson’s “inverted millenarianism”; instead of replacing the foreboding future with “senses of the end of this or that,” “Plan X’ people” replace it with the end of everything. At the risk of psychoanalyzing the fictional Plan X people, renewed interest by feminists in Lacan and Freud in the 80s provide a useful model for reading the Plan X’s people imagination of disaster. Jane Gallop’s Reading Lacan (1985), for example, helpfully illuminates, in psychoanalytic terms, the back and forth of a subject’s constitution as regards the event. In Lacanian terms, this event is the mirror stage, during which the infant jubilantly misrecognizes herself in the mirror as a coherent subject. Yet, as Gallop points out, it is also from this moment that the subject has the anxious sense of being the “*corps*

morcelé,” the “violently nontotalized body image” of the “body in bits and pieces” (79). The mirror stage appears to organize the disorganized body, “but actually, *that* violently unorganized *image only comes after* the mirror stage so as to *represent what came before*” (Gallop 80). Likewise, the organizing of the “‘Plan X’ people” seems to similarly construct itself beyond and before the final event. The futuristic X, by which Williams marks a “willed and deliberate unknown” is an organizing fiction that both precedes and follows--is both cause and effect--of the future event; likewise Jameson’s cratylistic nomination of postmodern sensibility precedes and follows the cultural evidence of postmodern subjectivity.

As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner point out in Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations (1991), a more moderate view of the break is shared by Foucault and Jacques Derrida, although neither of those figures is particularly associated with the term postmodernism. Foucault: “One of the most harmful habits in contemporary thought . . . is the analysis of the present as being precisely, in history, a present of rupture” (Foucault Live 359). Derrida: “I do not believe in decisive ruptures, in an unequivocal ‘epistemological break,’ as it is called today. Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone” (Positions 24). Best and Kellner, who discuss Foucault and Derrida’s position in order to build their own (they’re pro-break but pro-continuity),³³ take issue with the way many postmodern theorists “totalize and project a rupture or break within history that exaggerates the novelty of the contemporary moment. . . . [B]oth assume that a possible future is already present” (276). The sticking point for Best and Kellner seems to be this problem of exaggeration,

³³ “While by definition postmodernity is discontinuous with or constitutes a break from previous developments, we reject any periodizing analysis which emphasizes only discontinuity in favour of a dialectical analysis which theorizes the lines of continuity and discontinuity in a transition from one movement or period to another” (Best and Kellner 278).

characterized by excessive rhetoric or hyperbole, in which the epistemological, or capital, or cultural rupture that occurs must be perceived as radical; after all, one rarely speaks of minor drifts or slight changes in temperature (especially so, as has been pointed out, when one's own career depends to a certain extent upon finding things to write about; the Continental version of this is to be the more avant-garde). This exaggeration, which Foucault or Derrida are careful enough to avoid in principle, is most certainly a component of the "supreme act of nomination" of postmodernism as a periodizing hypothesis, and this rests against Best and Kellner (and even, as he includes himself later, Jameson) and their emphasis on continuity.

This discontinuous exaggeration, Peter Schjeldahl's "concerted indulgence" perhaps, raises another important quality of 80s America, and there is a punning reference to this in William Gibson's 1988 cyberpunk novel Mona Lisa Overdrive. Jameson mentions Gibson by name at least twice in Postmodernism (indeed Gibson is the first citation in the book, appearing in the third sentence).³⁴ Jameson is describing how "the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it was no longer the same; for the 'When-it-all-changed,' as Gibson puts it" (Postmodernism ix). But, Jameson is just off with his quotation; Gibson's expression for the break (or, in the narrative of Mona Lisa Overdrive, when artificial intelligences became self-aware) is simply "When It Changed."³⁵ One of the characters in Mona Lisa Overdrive is an Artificial Intelligence named Continuity, and Gibson punningly has Continuity provide help to other characters ("Continuity is continuity. Continuity is Continuity's job [259]) and has characters search for Continuity. Without over-reading Jameson's misreading, it strikes me that here is a clever turning point to get to the other

³⁴ Jameson regrets not having a chapter on cyberpunk, "the supreme *literary* expression . . . of late capitalism" (Postmodernism 419, n.1).

³⁵ Interestingly, "When It Changed" is also the title of a 1972 short story by Joanna Russ.

side of an ambivalence about the break. Misremembering Gibson as having written “when it *all* changed” exemplifies Jameson’s theoretical maneuverings--another act of nomination to crystalize the cratylistic (recall Jameson), another insistence of postmodern critics’ attraction to the scientific fantastic (recall Post-Modern Scientific Thought), and another example of the (masculine?) faith in total destruction and change (recall Golden Days). But a science fiction author like Gibson or Russ would never imply that it *all* changes; their worlds are simply too complex, there are too many social groups for such an event to occur.³⁶ “When it *all* changed” is the most common, and most harmful, conception of the break; it is striking that so many unproblematically associated the break with finality--with a total, permanent, and global rupture instead of as an event against which individuals may or may not be affected, or may be affected in a multitude of distinct ways. While the Bomb may have been another trope of the *coupure* in American 80s, it was not accepted unproblematically in culture or theory. Rather than see its effect as simply “unreal,” Jacques Derrida pursues nuclear war through the linguistic turn, labeling it “fabulously textual.”

The momentary appearance of Nuclear Criticism in 1984 demonstrates this other side of the *coupure*. In “No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives),” which appeared in a 1984 special issue of Diacritics devoted to the topic of Nuclear Criticism,³⁷ Derrida argues that total nuclear war cannot be imagined as an event or historical object, for if it occurred it would mean the end of history and of the possibility of testimony; the end of history cannot be properly contained by history, in that knowledge of the end of history cannot exist. In calling nuclear weaponry

³⁶ The postapocalyptic theme in science fiction film and literature invariably returns to this--there is never one subject after the Event (that would be a boring text), but always struggles between various groups. Jameson’s unwritten cyberpunk chapter surely would have made this clear. See, for the 80s, Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982), The Road Warrior (George Miller, 1981), and Akira (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1987).

³⁷ The special issue was connected to a conference held at Cornell University in April 1984.

“fabulously textual,” Derrida means to bring it into the purview of students of language, rather than allow it to remain in the hands of militarists, technicians, or politicians. Derrida takes this further, arguing that a “nuclear strategy can never do without a sophistry of belief and the rhetorical simulation of a text” (“No Apocalypse” 24); this is what he means by calling nuclear war a “fable”--since total nuclear war has not occurred, it is a “non-event,” “something one can only talk about” (“No Apocalypse” 23), “an invention to be invented in order to make a place for it or to prevent it from taking place” (“No Apocalypse” 28). Nuclear war is thus (for the moment, when it has not taken place) susceptible to the textual strategies of the humanities. This explains the latter part of Derrida’s title--missives and missiles are coterminous since the possibility of conceiving of the uniqueness of a nuclear war (“its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time” [“No Apocalypse” 26]) depends not upon the threat to humanity, but upon the threat to the archive of literature, the “total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism” (“No Apocalypse” 26). He continues, “the only ‘subject’ of all possible literature, of all possible criticism . . . [is] the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature” (“No Apocalypse” 28). Literature and criticism thus work incessantly to recuperate the imagination of their own demise, they work to “assimilate that unassimilable wholly other” (“No Apocalypse” 28).

Perhaps it is from this impulse that postmodern contradiction arises?

The problem that Derrida and the other critics in the Diacritics issue deal with is again one of nomination. Derrida’s first missile, first missive concerns itself with speed,³⁸ and more precisely the “speed race” in the beginning between word and act, as well as the later speed race between those who see nuclear war as a new phenomenon and those who

³⁸ See Paul Virilio, who also starts from speed, especially War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception (1989).

instead trace a movement always already at work. Slow down! Derrida urges, although his title indicates full speed ahead. In its colloquium proposal, *Diacritics* labels Nuclear Criticism “a new topic and an explicitation of what is already everywhere being done” (“Proposal” 2).³⁹ The “explicitation,” an explicit explication, evokes a specificity of detail or a rigor of interrogation as regards the “recent criticism and critical theory and feeling that without exception . . . recounts an allegory of nuclear survival” (“Proposal” 2), and this sense is further conveyed by the Latin meaning of *explicit* as a noun: “here ends,” used by scholars to signify the end of a book. And there an “explicitation” (the *explicit* citation) of the nuclear, the citation of literature’s end, of “what is already everywhere being done,” turns around on itself, and so this kind of academic “explicitation” passes over the deep illogic of “thinking the event, the coming or venue of a first time which would also be a last time” (“No Apocalypse” 30). This is the nucleus of criticism, the nuclear question of criticism (and Derrida puns also upon “nu-clear criticism . . . mak[ing] clear what is unclear [“No Apocalypse” 26]). “Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility,” said Jameson (*Postmodernism* ix), nominating nonetheless “postmodernism” as the retroactive name of the “inaugural narrative act” of the break, which structures in turn the possibility of the imagination of the break. Derrida likewise concludes “No Apocalypse, Not Now” with the name. The name in which nuclear war is fought will be a name that cannot survive the war, and so “that name in which the war would take place would be the name of nothing, it would be pure name . . . with only the non-name of ‘name’ . . . beyond all genealogy . . . the Apocalypse of the Name” (“No Apocalypse” 30-1). Postmodern theory, if it can be said by its Americanness to reside near Nuclear

³⁹ Another kind of definition of postmodernism, except “nuclear criticism” as a phrased field of study is so less linguistically available for adoption.

Criticism, does so around its own “condition of possibility,” whether theorized or actual. The name of postmodernism is by this reason a false imagination of the “Apocalypse of the Name,” albeit a necessarily imaginative one--a too fast explicitation perhaps of “what is already everywhere being done.”

Moving past the ontological question, if you will, of the event of the break is the epistemological one; if we are to believe Jameson, whether or not it truly happened, the statement (repeated often enough) that it did so is enough to make it real and material for any number of us (indeed, Derrida cites Freud on a related point). We see, for example, in someone like Baudrillard an over-anxiety regarding Derrida’s argument; what if the break has already occurred, but no one noticed? Or, if it is happening now, with or without participation? Putting the break in the present distracts from the problems of memorialization or history, and forces an anticipation of the event--the manifest (material) sign of the next big shift (whether an “inverted millenarianism” or not). The 80s are filled with such indications: the eruption of Mount St. Helens (1980), the Challenger explosion (1986), Chernobyl (1986), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), AIDS (1981), Reagan’s “Star Wars” (1983). A novel like Don DeLillo’s White Noise, published in 1985 (portions appeared the year before in Vanity Fair), deals insistently with the vacuity and blandness of contemporary, technologized suburban life and the ever-looming Big Event (called here “The Airborne Toxic Event”), beyond which the characters can only mimic an imagined, faked response. “Isn’t death the boundary we need,” one of the protagonist’s colleagues asks; would life “have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit” (DeLillo 229)? In White Noise, the threat of disaster is mirrored by the presence of a drug, Dylar, which is taken to ease the fear of dying. Dylar’s side effect is that its user, like an unwitting Cratylus, confuses

words with the things they referred to (this Babelic theme is repeated in another important text, Paul Auster's City of Glass [1985]). In White Noise, there is continually a false dichotomy laid between the event and its anticipation. This is true also of David B. Feinberg's Eighty-Sixed (1989), one of many AIDS narratives which breaks cleanly and desperately into two parts--"1980: Ancient History" and "1986: Learning How to Cry" (Tony Kushner's Angels in America comes to mind as another).

Of course, for many of the critics I have been discussing the break is inextricably tied to a slightly earlier time: the events of May '68. One of these is Jean Baudrillard, whose ecstatic, often hyperbolic visions of America mirror the pre-postmodernist religious writings I referred to earlier (cf. especially America: "I went in search of *astral* America . . . the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways . . . the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces" [5]). In an interview conducted by Sylvère Lotringer during 1984-85, "Forget Baudrillard," Baudrillard muses on the meaning of the events of May '68 and the way that it "managed to absorb its own continuity" (Forget Foucault 105). And again, "May '68 was the first event that corresponded to this inertial point of the political scene. Continuity disappears" (Forget Foucault 106). In this example of the event, Baudrillard is unable to draw any conclusions since there appeared to be no "post" to the activity; he labels it "an event which it has been impossible to rationalize or exploit, from which nothing has been concluded. It remains indecipherable. It was the forerunner of nothing" (Forget Foucault 114-15). What we can glean from the events of May '68 is the way the break covers over itself; as much as he positions himself against Foucault, Baudrillard shares in this something of the ambivalence about what the event does or does not lead to. Yet Baudrillard's concern--the discontinuity of the energy of May '68--can only be expressed by the pithy reversal,

“when effects go faster than causes, they devour them” (Forget Foucault 114).

Baudrillard formulates this same process as a critical formulation; “it’s possible that theory will implode, that it will absorb its own meaning, that it will end up at best mastering its disappearance” (Forget Foucault 128) (and I wonder how Barthes’ “writing degree zero” would fit with this?).

In America, Baudrillard places an ease of life as cause for the seeming unconcern with the “finished form of the future catastrophe” (5) that he locates in the desert. “The ease with which we now live . . . makes survivors of us all. If the bomb drops, we shall neither have the time to die nor any awareness of dying” (America 42). This, though, is actually all secondary in Baudrillard’s ironic formulation, for in America’s “hyper-protected society we no longer have any awareness of death,” since life is “so excessively easy” (America 43). Baudrillard marks the Holocaust as the “anticipatory form of such a condition” (America 43). The Holocaust “robbed” its victims of “power over their own deaths” (America 43). But the Holocaust was only the beginning, the first in a “viral” chain of events--“the explosions and the extermination (Auschwitz and Hiroshima) still go on,” but in a “purulent, endemic form. . . . The end of history was precisely the inauguration of this chain reaction” (America 43). Baudrillard rather unsympathetically (if that category of emotion could be applied to Auschwitz or Hiroshima) locates the beginning of the end of history as a retrospectively smaller event, since these two historical moments constitute at heart a kind of attenuation to death, or the loss of power over one’s own death. The two events--“the explosions and the extermination (Auschwitz and Hiroshima)” (curiously reversed, and made singular, in parenthesis)--which constitute some of our knowledge of the threat of the end of history, in fact turn out to be simply “slow, homeopathic doses” of “the contagion, the unfolding of the viral

and bacteriological process” of the easy life (America 43). Baudrillard claims that such “silent indifference to nuclear pathos” actually has a restorative function, in that it keeps at bay the imagination of death which “brings the event closer” (“a great sign of hope and a political fact of utmost importance” [America 43]); such silent indifference is of little consolation in light of an otherwise nihilistic postmodern attitude, really defensible only in terms of the aesthetics of the avant-garde.

Gianni Vattimo, in The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture (1985, translated 1988), renders this in terms of postmodernism’s periodizing hypothesis. Vattimo’s translator, Jon Snyder, summarizes the argument: “post-modernity is an experience of ‘the end of history,’ not the appearance of a different, or newer, stage of history itself” (Vattimo xviii). Working with the concept of “post-history” (first used, I believe, by Arnold Gehlen in a 1967 essay), by which he means “the experience of ‘the end of history’” (xix), Vattimo demonstrates that the “crisis of legitimation” or “breakdown of narrative” or “loss of historicity” in fact turns back in upon itself, and, “seen in this light, progress no longer seems to lead anywhere except to the creation of ‘conditions in which [more] progress . . . is always possible in an always new guise’” (7). Due to this increasing production of progress, progress no longer retains its meaning as “a *forward* movement in history and of the new as something qualitatively different from what precedes it” and thus one arrives at the “end of history” (Vattimo xix).⁴⁰ Put this way, the end of history is not necessarily a negative thing; Vattimo “sees the experience of the loss of history and historicity . . . as a ‘positive opportunity’ and a ‘field of possibility’ for late twentieth-century humanity. The end of history, then, is the

⁴⁰ Tied into this argument is Vattimo’s other point about postmodernism, that it is not a progress over modernism (which would not carry any meaning), but is “rather an experience of the end of metaphysics and the end of history which accompanies the most advanced phases of modernity itself, up to and including the end of modernity” (xlviii).

beginning of something else” (xix). This is in keeping with Vattimo’s qualified, optimistic outlook about postmodernism, which offers a set of strategies and examples of life in a world which seems particularly malleable.

But Baudrillard fails “to choose and discriminate between the possibilities that the post-modern condition offers us,” since he seems not to heed Vattimo’s advice to recognize “post-modernity as a field of possibility and not simply as a hellish negation of all this is human” (12). America, with its offhand dismissal of “the explosions and the extermination,” is too caught up in the lure of the myth of the American West--deserts and highways and a hyperreal “land of the ‘just as it is’” (America 28)--for me to take Baudrillard seriously (or, this is a reaction: “just as it is” does not characterize my experience). In America, Baudrillard offered a more lyrical solution to the problem of the break which he had earlier developed in a European context. Given the various formulations of anxiety over the break (whether it has happened or not, whether it constitutes the end of history or the marker against which to render meaning to our own present), it is interesting to consider the theme Baudrillard returns to most often: the possibility of the unknown break or event, which he will call “dead points.” The dead point is a term first elaborated in 1983’s Fatal Strategies, and comes up repeatedly for Baudrillard.

The first question that Sylvère Lotringer asks Baudrillard in their 1984-85 interview is about the “series of liquidations” that Baudrillard’s work produces--the “end of production, the end of history, the end of the political” (Forget Foucault 67). To answer this, Baudrillard begins with the European thinker Elias Canetti, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981. Baudrillard responds to Lotringer’s question by beginning not with the end, but with an idea that “sounds a little like science fiction”

(Forget Foucault 68). Baudrillard cites Canetti's memoir The Human Province, published in translation in 1978, to illustrate his sense of history:

It is possible, [Canetti] says--and he finds the idea rather painful--that starting from a precise moment in time the human race has dropped out of history.

Without even being conscious of the change, we suddenly left reality behind.

What we have to do now, continues Canetti, would be to find that critical point, that blind spot in time. Otherwise, we just continue on with our self-destructive ways. This hypothesis appeals to me because Canetti doesn't envisage an end, but rather what I would call [sic] an 'ecstasy', in the primal sense of the word--a passage at the same time into the dissolution and the transcendence of a form.

(Forget Foucault 68)

Compare this to the following passage; Baudrillard begins "Pataphysics of the Year 2000," from The Illusion of the End, with Canetti, quoting the following paragraph from The Human Province as his epigraph:

A tormenting thought: as of a certain point, history was no longer *real*. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction. (69)

Baudrillard uses Canetti in order to make a claim about the present mode of living and the possibility for change in this particular age. Canetti's "end" appeals to Baudrillard because it is not an end, or rather because it is an end which may have already happened, and the threat of which prompts a comprehension of that event. But for Canetti, the faith in resurrecting the "dead point" is a way of undoing the pessimism of those like

Williams's "Plan X' people."

In Jane Gallop's terms above, the event--the dead point--appears to precede the end of history, but actually the violent image of death--the dead point which made history (and thus mankind) unreal, only comes after the event "so as to *represent what came before*" (Gallop 80). Baudrillard has a difficult time imagining the end of history. In its place is something like Canetti's dead point, which comes after to represent what came before; what is actually already technically away from or outside history comes back as a (post-) historical marker of that very same blind spot. Baudrillard's paraphrase of Canetti is more insistent than the original: "what we have to do now . . . would be to find that critical point, that blind spot in time. Otherwise, we just continue on with our self-destructive ways." Canetti calls this "a tormenting thought," as if it were a paranoid's vision; Baudrillard escalates it to ecstasy, to program. Science fiction films of the 80s are full of metaphorizations of this kind of project. For example two very different, but equally popular science fiction films from the 80s, James Cameron's The Terminator (1984) and Robert Zemeckis's Back to the Future (1985), both feature, but from different sides of the divide, travelers from the future who, as a matter of life and death, close the break between present and future, and must seek the very "dead point" to which the rest of humanity was blind and must remain blind.⁴¹

"Surreptitiously (as Canetti has it), it's possible that everything is no longer real or true. In any case we would no longer be in a position to decide that. . . . Suddenly, there is a curve in the road, a turning point. Somewhere, the real scene has been lost" (Forget Foucault 68-9). This is precisely the point upon which Lyotard stakes his claim; to give up on history, to give up on the possibility of truth, plays for the shock of a kind

⁴¹ As I write this, two others also come to mind: The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai Across the Eighth Dimension! (W.D. Richter, 1984) and Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure (Stephen Herek, 1989).

of moral or ethical relativism which gave postmodernism such a bad name in the first place.⁴² Sylvère Lotringer, in that interview, summarizes Baudrillard's position: "history survives its disappearance, but somewhere its spirit got snatched away" (Forget Foucault 68). It is difficult to find in Baudrillard's fascination with the dead point any kind of liberatory strategy to avoid "our self-destructive ways." Besides taking Canetti into a rather different context, Baudrillard attempts to take the rest of us with him. While we have left history unwittingly, it is certainly there waiting for our return, waiting for us to pick up where we last left off. The rapturing of an innocent past is as harmful as disavowing it.

IV. Lyotard/After Auschwitz

Finally, the most complex negotiation of our three terms--periodization, break, event--is offered by Jean-François Lyotard. While The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979, translated 1984) is his most popular statement about the postmodern, his later text, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (1983, translated 1988),⁴³ ultimately represents one of the most fruitful extensions of Lyotard's claims about the loss of narrative or historicity into the field of ethics, and contemporary thinking about the possibility of history after the event. The fact that it is not about postmodernism, and takes as its central example Auschwitz, helps Lyotard avoid, at least explicitly, the problem of offering postmodernism as yet another periodizing hypothesis. Instead, at the heart of The Differend, Lyotard examines the double bind of enunciating the

⁴² Lotringer asks, "I've often wondered how one could live theories like yours" to which Baudrillard responds, "Somewhere along the line I stopped living, in Canetti's sense" (Forget Foucault 80, 81).

⁴³ Parts of the first two chapters of Lyotard's work appeared in an issue of Diacritics in Fall 1984, a sort of *annus mirabilis* for the opening up of postmodernism proper (and Yuppies--cf. Chapter 4) inaugurated in a sense by Jameson's "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (New Left Review), the English translation of Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition, and Foucault's final publications.

ineluctable, or of fitting language and language games into a political philosophy that takes account of the truth-value of a statement about the break or event.

The Differend is written in an idiosyncratic style consisting of a prefatory “Reading Dossier”; “Notices” on Kant, Levinas, Hegel, Stein, Aristotle, and Plato; and built up carefully by means of the accretion of numbered, inter-indexed, Wittgensteinian (or Barthesian--the “naive ideal . . . to attain a zero degree style” [Differend xiv]) fragments.⁴⁴ Lyotard introduces the concept of the *différend* (left untranslated as “differend”), which he defines as “a case of conflict . . . that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (Differend xi). This irresolubility is due to certain “phrases in dispute,” which come from different “phrase regimens” and thus, in their heterogeneity, are only “linked” together in discourse, rather than, as is typically assumed in law, act as equivalents. To demonstrate this problem, “to bear witness to the differend” (Differend xiii), is to show “that the linking of one phrase onto another is problematic and that this problem is the problem of politics” (Differend xiii). The project of The Differend, as Lyotard succinctly puts it, is this:

given 1) the impossibility of avoiding conflicts . . . and 2) the absence of a universal genre of discourse to regulate them . . . : to find, if not what can legitimate judgment . . . then at least how to save the honor of thinking. (xii)

This, then, is a project about language and legitimacy, about arbitration and the consensus of politics, and about the present moment, which, coming as it does on the heels of “the ‘linguistic turn’ of Western philosophy” and its correlative “decline of universalist discourse,” demonstrates a certain “weariness with regard to ‘theory,’ and the miserable slackening that goes along with it (new this, new that, post-this, post-that, etc.)”

⁴⁴ “You really are reading a book of philosophy, the phrases in it are concatenated in such a way as to show that that concatenation is not just a matter of course and that the rule for their concatenation remains to be found” (Differend 129).

(Differend xiii). Lyotard's tone from the outset is one of intervention--"the time has come to philosophize" (Differend xiii)--and at the moment he writes he is intent on shifting the "slackening" of a rapturous theorizing over (certainly, although he does not mention it by name) postmodernism to an understanding of the way in which events--breaks and moments that appear insurmountable--are part of a language system that sets itself up around the "object of an Idea" (Differend xii).

Lyotard's starting point is Faurisson, a Holocaust-denier who rests his denial on what he sees as a lack of evidence--"to find a single former deportee capable of proving to me that he had really seen, with his own eyes, a gas chamber" (Differend 3). Lyotard is not immediately concerned, as others were, with the moral or historical value of such a statement, but rather with its logical value, or rather, its legal value--the possibility of arbitrating this claim, which rests as Lyotard demonstrates, on a logical implosion. The opening of The Differend proceeds from Lyotard's central witness to the differend, Auschwitz:

1. You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak about it. When they do speak about it, their testimony bears only a minute part of this situation. How can you know that the situation itself existed? (3).

The differend exists here in the impossibility of a survivor of the gas chambers to provide specific witness of that event, for either no such survivor would exist (and thus there would be no witness to the gas chambers), or a survivor's evidence would be incomplete, since he or she is alive to offer testimony (his or her very existence in turn refuting his or her testimony about the gas chamber's finality). This is what would technically be called

a dilemma, and Lyotard analyzes the problem in terms of logic,⁴⁵ but also more importantly in terms of language, for the differend occurs not within one logical system or language, but between differing “phrases.” Number 22 explains the problem: “the differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” (Differend 13). I would linger on the way Lyotard phrases this, for in its final verbal clause is the possibility of a potentially redeeming, future linguistic manipulation. “In the differend,” Lyotard writes in Number 23, “something ‘asks’ to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away” (Differend 13). Herein lie the frustrations born of the mistaken assumption of man’s ascent to language and the ease and mastery of speech. What is so compelling about Lyotard’s argument is the way in which he attempts to place the “phrases in dispute” into a system outside of a concept of humanism which centers “language” as the privileged tool of “man.” In this, he rectifies his misuse of Wittgenstein’s expression “language game” in The Postmodern Condition, where it there seemed to imply that two opponents could play with language equally, or that language was indeed an object outside of its user; “phrases in dispute” retains the combative or miscommunicative quality of language, while making way for the case of the differend or of the victim who is not yet able to bear sufficient witness to his or her injury. “The Stakes” of The Differend as he calls them, are to “defend and illustrate philosophy in its differend,” rather than to just throw the towel in on the whole mess (Differend xiii).

To return to The Differend’s beginning, why Auschwitz? Many of the critics we have considered favor the nuclear metaphor as representative of the potential, but always imagined “X” event beyond which history ceases. But in what way does Auschwitz

⁴⁵ “The mechanism consists in applying to two contradictory propositions, *p* and *not-p*, two logical operators: exclusion (either . . . , or) and implication (if . . . , then). So, at once [(*either p or not-p*) and (*if p, then not-p*)]” (Differend 6, ellipses in original).

work as a better example? One answer is that Faurisson, and French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet's response to him, provides a timely example of the dangerous relativism to be found at the end of the age of ends (perhaps at the narrative of the end of narratives). But Lyotard's interest goes farther back; on the copyright page, we find that he delivered a version of Chapter 4 ("Results") in French in 1980 as a talk called "Discussions, ou phrasier 'Après Auschwitz,'" at the conference "Les fins de l'homme: à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida." But actually it is not yet Derrida who Lyotard turns to for his example, but Theodor Adorno, who in the third section of Negative Dialectics begins with "several micrologies called 'After Auschwitz.'" Lyotard confronts the problem of how "after Auschwitz" designates a model (as opposed to an example) that "would designate an 'experience' of language that brings speculative discourse to a halt" (Differend 88). But supposing this were the case, "does it follow that it leaves place only to subjective chatter and the wickedness of modesty" (Differend 89)? Since this possibility itself comes from speculative logic, even imagining a non-speculative logic perpetuates a speculative logic (Differend 89). The only answer is "to imagine that the cleaving introduced into Western thought by 'Auschwitz' does not pass outside of speculative discourse . . . [and that r]ather this cleaving cracks speculative logic itself and not merely its effects" (Differend 89-90).

In finding the successful operation of a speculative logic to apply to "after Auschwitz" (raised by the problem of speculating "after Auschwitz"), Lyotard must also find that "the price paid for speculation is the suppression of the we as an identity that thinks or phrases from the outside" (Differend 96). It is this very impossibility of a "we" that determines "Auschwitz" as susceptible to speculative logic, by leading to "a kind of disauthorization . . . a dispersion [perhaps] worse than the diaspora, the dispersion of

phrases” (Differend 98). Lyotard concludes that “between the SS and the Jew there is not even a differend, because there is not even a common idiom (that of a tribunal) in which even damages could be formulated” (Differend 106). These “even damages” rely upon a common *we* of humanity, a shared idiom of legitimation effaced by the Nazis. In claiming this, we can thus perhaps say that there is a differend between Lyotard’s conception of the “after Auschwitz” and Derrida’s formulation of Nuclear Criticism, which turns upon the destruction of a hierarchy of phrases, an apocalypse of literature distinct from an apocalypse of peoples (Derrida’s more speculative “humanity”).

Another answer, in the larger context of the 80s, has to do with other thinkers’ return to the question of the Holocaust as a problem of recent history, which is to say a rather direct object lesson in the problem of writing history, but also increasingly in the problem of writing the other’s history. Keith Jenkins, who edited The Postmodern History Reader, considers how “the problematization of the Holocaust urgently raises the question of what might be the limits of historical representation in these postmodern (and indeed other) days” (385-6). Certainly the most famous of these representations is Art Spiegelman’s Maus, which is carefully constructed around a series of narrative events--the artist Art Spiegelman writing and drawing a graphic novel in which he figures as the son Artie who interviews his father Vladek, who in turn tells his Holocaust narrative. For me, the most interesting thing about Maus is the exclusion of Art’s mother Anja’s story, which Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller have focused on as a sort of absent core to the text. Anja’s lost war diaries, later rewritten as a memoir for Artie, turn out to have been burned by a depressed Vladek, who admits this to Artie at the end of Maus’s first volume. Miller reads “the question of Anja as that which will forever escape representation and at the same time requires it: the silence of the victims” (“Cartoons”

49). While the autobiographical qualities of Maus may initially revolve around Artie and Vladek's difficult relationship, Miller suggests that, curiously, "it's as if at the heart of Maus's dare is the wish to save the mother by retrieving her narrative," ("Cartoons" 49) although the impossibility of this (a detail repeated throughout both volumes) does not minimize the artist's need to try to represent the victim's silence. Discussing Auschwitz, Lyotard concludes that "the Jewish phrase has not taken place" and thus we have only "silences" (Differend 106), and it is this specific problem against which Art must suture his own absences. Joshua Brown argues a similar point, beginning (as many critics do) from Spiegelman's narrativizing of the Holocaust (an event implicitly assumed to be immune to such process); "Spiegelman is exceedingly self-conscious about history as a construction and troubled by the fabrication of order, the distorting of historical experience, necessitated in the creation of a comprehensible narrative" (1669). There is, especially in the second volume (published in 1991, after the first volume's success), an excessive self-consciousness in Spiegelman's "covering" of the gaps between his frames, which illustrates the absences necessary to render what is placed within the frames.

But, other critics take up the point about Anja's effaced narrative to point out the way in which forgetting is crucial to remembering. Marianne Hirsch, using the term "postmemory," points out how Spiegelman has incorporated frequently repeated Holocaust photographs into his drawings, such as the two gates of Auschwitz, the guard towers, and mass graves. "His graphic versions recall the photographs we have all seen," argues Hirsch, and by repeating these iconic images he "reminds us that memory also depends on forgetting, that reduction and canonization, and also figuration, are indeed crucial to the work of postmemory" ("Surviving" 30). I believe Lyotard would agree, as he argues in Postmodern Condition that if recourse to narrative is inevitable (the

speculative phrasing of history), then we must “admit an irreducible need for history understood . . . not as a need to remember or to project (a need for historicity, for accent), but on the contrary as a need to forget (a need for *metrum*)” (28). This is a tricky point, however, and raises precisely the problem Spiegelman wants to avoid: representing the Holocaust by means of only one survivor’s narrative. Hirsch defines postmemory as “the relationship of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but [which] constitute memories in their own right” (“Surviving” 9). The proper transmission of these memories is at the heart of Maus, both narratively and in the context of debates over Holocaust representation. Few critics attacked what could have been the shocking aspect of Maus--the use of a cartoon medium and “funny animals”⁴⁶--to remember the Holocaust. Yet, narratively, Spiegelman continually illustrates improper or unwitting transmissions, certainly with Vladek’s burning of Anja’s memoir (and the related absence of Anja not leaving a suicide note), but also Vladek’s accidental finding of Art’s comic about Anja’s suicide, Prisoner on the Hell Planet, and Vladek’s posed prisoner portrait taken in a “fake” camp uniform. Between these moments are the historical elements--the translated and real photographs, Vladek and Art’s argument about whether an orchestra played at the gates, the correct sequencing of Vladek’s memory with other Holocaust accounts--which Hirsch locates as postmemorial.

Referring in part to postmodern theory, James Young argues that “in an era when absolute truth claims are under assault, Spiegelman’s Maus also makes a case for an essentially reciprocal relationship between the truth of what happened and the truth of how it is remembered” (698). For Young, this may lead to history as “vicarious past,”

the “afterlife of memory,” but Young makes the claim that it is impossible to ignore the

⁴⁶ An early, three-page version of Maus appeared in a collection with this intentionally misspelled title.

“circumstances surrounding a story’s telling,” which are half of the narrative of the event itself (699); indeed he goes so far as to say that Holocaust narrative must include the means of transmission in order to show the importance of the Holocaust. The important story may be Vladek’s, but without Art’s story we would not be able to understand why it is important. Elaborating this point, Miles Orvell connects Maus with another novel with a comic book protagonist, Jay Kantor’s Krazy Kat (1988), based on George Herriman’s 1913-1944 newspaper strip. Krazy Kat, not about the Holocaust, opens with the testing of the atomic bomb at Alamogordo,⁴⁷ but both, according to Miles Orvell, “have--in a landscape of postmodern irony--stood out conspicuously for a literature that positions the subject psychologically and morally in history, thus pointing fiction in a healthy social direction” (110). Like Hirsch’s postmemory, which “mediate[s] not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation” (“Surviving” 9), the focus on the narration in addition to the narrative directly counters common theories of postmodern flatness or superficiality.

The publication of the first volume of Maus (1986) occurs in the same year as another newsworthy event in American recognition and negotiation of the Holocaust. Ronald Reagan, desiring in part to help German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s reputation (Kohl was not allowed to participate in the prior June’s D-Day anniversary), was to make a 40th anniversary visit to Kolmeshöhe, a cemetery near Bitburg which Reagan believed to contain the remains of American and German soldiers from World War II. But, after making his plans Reagan was told that not only were no Americans buried at

⁴⁷ Krazy Kat is an important work that deserves more consideration, especially in contrast to Baudrillard’s similarly themed America, as well as its development of the concept of history aside Krazy Kat’s “post-atomic roundness,” which this two-dimensional cartoon character develops after the Alamogordo test.

Bitburg, but also that 49 members of the Waffen SS were interred there.⁴⁸ Many tried to get Reagan to cancel his visit, including Elie Wiesel (“that place . . . is not your place” [243]) and Nancy Reagan, but Reagan went ahead with the visit on 5 May 1985, adding at the last minute a visit to Bergen-Belsen, despite having earlier refused to go to Dachau for fear of “reawakening the memories” of Germany’s “great feelings of guilt” (Hartman xiv). Commentators on Bitburg focus mostly on Reagan’s rhetorical moves, which attempted to shift the public relations disaster onto the intended meaning of the visit: “reconciliation.” But as Habermas put it, “someone who ‘does’ Bergen-Belsen in the morning and holds a veterans meeting in Bitburg in the afternoon has something else in mind” (New Conservatism 214).

During this time, Habermas was engaged with others in the historians’ debate and with the German problem *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* or “coming to terms with the past.”⁴⁹ According to his reading, the Federal Republic had an “era of neoconservative stabilization” in the 1980s, and Christian Democrats began to return to office. “The centerpiece of this process of ‘normalization’ was to have been the visit of the American President to the German military cemetery at Bitburg” (New Conservatism xiii). Clifford Marks, comparing the strategies of Maus and Reagan’s remarks at Bitburg, finds that the two work in opposite directions: “Reagan reduced the Holocaust to a single meaning to give it closure . . . in a sense he tried to ‘fix’ the Holocaust by giving people relief from memory and history” (314). Reagan’s rhetoric of reconciliation is a monolithic forgetting, a willed ignorance (what else could one call it in the face of those later revelations) of the past for the sake of the present. In attempting to move past the past, Reagan was forced

⁴⁸ Reagan puts the number at 48, others at 47 or 56. There was some discussion about who was to blame for the incorrect information; evidently when the Americans complained that they were not told about the buried SS members, the Germans countered that they had not known (snow covered the graves) and that at any rate the Americans should have sought out the information themselves.

⁴⁹ One position: “in a land without history, whoever fills memory, coins the concepts, and interprets the past, wins the future” (Michael Stürmer, qtd. in New Conservatism xiv).

to rhetorical extremes, suggesting for example that the Waffen SS were as much conscripted victims of Nazism as the Jews, or stating inexplicably that “the German people have very few alive that remember even the war, and certainly none that were adults and participating in any way” (Reagan qtd. in New Conservatism xxviii). Richard Wolin, in his introduction to Habermas’s The New Conservatism, read the unintended effect: “what was intended as a display of German ‘normalcy’ was thereby transformed into a prime example of that country’s inclination toward grievous lapses of historical memory” (xiii-xiv). The same is argued repeatedly by American commentators; see especially Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, an incisive collection of primary and secondary sources published in 1986. But unmentioned is the way that American formulations of postmodernism gesture towards such lapses of historical memory. Certainly postmodernism is incomparable to Nazism, but in criticizing Reagan, many fail to connect a German problem of coming to terms with the past with an American problem of coming to terms with the present. Reagan’s desire to paper over the atrocities of World War II by means of “reconciliation” may be grotesque, but they are also in keeping with postmodern’s proclamation of the new subject at the end of history.

In the fifth chapter I want to elaborate upon an alternate strategy of dealing with postmodernism that is neither simply pessimistic nor optimistic, neither catastrophic nor redemptive. For it is not an option, when a critic tells you to embrace the break, to simply refuse to do so. Nor does it change the nature of the game, when a critic tells you that you have been for some time postmodern, to simply refute him or her. These are but other differends between individual subjects and an increasingly collective and admonitory program labeled postmodernism. While Jameson feels compelled to engage with postmodernism because it is truly there, and Lyotard feels compelled to engage with it

even if it were an artifice, neither of these positions take into successful account the ethical dimension active in the cultural landscape of the 1980s.

I wanted to conclude this chapter abruptly; there are far too many threads running between the catastrophic and the redemptive to pluck them all. I consider closing with Roland Barthes, anticipating my next chapter's, and the chapter that follows's, concern with maternal history. In the second part of Camera Lucida (1980, translated 1981), Barthes considers photographs found shortly after his mother's death:

Thus the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it--and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history (impossible for me to believe in 'witnesses'; impossible, at least, to be one . . .). That is what the time when my mother was alive *before me* is--History." (65)

I intended to discuss anamnesis as a postmodern strategy, but find it all contained here in Barthes's fragment. History is postmemorial, is always exclusive of the subject's desire to access it. The end of history cannot be spoken, for history raises itself up by the knowledge that part of you lived before you ever did.

Chapter Two

Brat Pack Mommies (Bright Lights, Big City)

“Brats are irresistible, for they are without shame, they are premoral, they waft. . . . Brats are what everyone else wants to be” (Rudnick, “Do Brats Have More Fun?” 22, 24).

“Not even a dying mother runs deep” (Hendin, “Fictions of Acquisition,” 219)

As is the case with the word postmodernism, each of the objects of knowledge which are put forth in the 80s as new subject types actually refer back to prior historical categories. For all of its supposed novelty and invention, the Eighties feeds upon the Fifties and Sixties for its self-definition, while cloaking these historical references by emphasizing the sense of presentness and the contemporary. Fredric Jameson terms this process pastiche, which is distinguishable from parody in the blankness or affectlessness of its performance (Postmodernism 16-19). While Jameson’s distinction provides a useful critical tool for art or architecture, as a description of 80s subjectivity it overemphasizes the loss of history and supposedly concomitant “deadness” of culture (“speech in a dead language,” “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” [Postmodernism 17]). This chapter will demonstrate how the emphasis on pastiche cultural labels that exclude history cannot be as unproblematically accepted as postmodern theory might assume. The Brat, in particular, is an object of knowledge which becomes a new 80s model for contemporary youth as well as a source of anxiety for adults. This becomes especially clear in depictions of the Brat in relation to his or her mother; in brat narratives the mother is almost always presented as dead or dying, and in the brat’s fascination with the dead mother we can read American cultural interests as

closely familial and expressive of new anxieties over what a mother can mean socially, politically, and culturally.

I. The Hollywood Brat Pack

The word “brat” to refer contemptuously to a child was used as early as 1502 (OED). In the 80s, the word began to be used ironically and was jokingly turned into a collective group: a brat pack. This label “Brat Pack” was first used by journalist David Blum in “Hollywood’s Brat Pack,” a 1985 cover story in New York magazine on the Hollywood film industry. Blum’s phrase characterizes “the young movie stars you can’t quite keep straight,” and his piece offers an introductory survey of “what kids want to see and what kids want to be” (“Hollywood’s” 40). Focusing primarily on three male actors--Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson, and Rob Lowe--Blum’s first formulation of the Hollywood Brat Pack misses a number of key figures. Most notably, the only women he mentions are either unknown hangers-on or Playboy Playmates, and so Blum leaves out actresses such as Ally Sheedy, Molly Ringwald, Demi Moore, Mare Winningham, and Andie MacDowell, who all worked together on Joel Schumacher’s St. Elmo’s Fire (1985), a film whose cast is one of the definitive groupings of the Brat Pack.⁵⁰ The other commonly cited key film is John Hughes’s The Breakfast Club (1985), starring Sheedy, Ringwald, Estevez, Nelson, and Anthony Michael Hall.

The rather singular quality of the name the Hollywood Brat Pack belies the fact that there are no official or unofficial members; the pack’s numbers range from three to thirty or more. The basic disagreement over “who is” and “who isn’t” is due to the fact that none of the actors involved embraced the label, while the popular press immediately

⁵⁰ Ally Sheedy is mentioned in Blum’s article, but only in a picture caption to War Games (1983), where she is marked as “compatibly cute” to Matthew Broderick (“Hollywood’s” 44).

picked it up to characterize not only the new Hollywood films of this period but also to cultivate a young, exciting image of Hollywood. For his part, Blum defines the Brat Pack in two different ways. Firstly, he portrays the group as a collectivized form of the star system (actors whose faces “you can’t quite keep straight”); secondly, the group members maintain their own pseudo-demographic profile (for example, Estevez is “The Leader and Treasurer”). These two contrasting definitions allow for continued reinvention of the Brat Pack at the same time as the Brat Pack can be seen as a stable social group with defined roles. Contrary to expectations, not being able to quite keep everyone straight serves not to weaken the group’s identity, but rather to strengthen it by making it more diffuse. For example, moviegoers confused by the similarity between Matthew Broderick and Matthew Modine may go to see Full Metal Jacket (1987, decidedly *not* a Brat Pack film) after enjoying Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986, by the Pack’s auteur John Hughes).⁵¹

To correct some of this confusion, Blum gives each actor he discusses a pseudo-demographic handle: Tom Cruise is “The Hottest of Them All,” Rob Lowe has “The Most Beautiful Face,” Judd Nelson is “The Overrated One,” Timothy Hutton is “The Only One With an Oscar,” Matt Dillon is “The One Least Likely to Replace Marlon Brando,” and Sean Penn is “The Most Gifted of Them All” (“Hollywood’s” 42-3). In addition to separating these otherwise indistinguishable young male actors, this kind of generic differentiation also reveals a more calculated effect at creating group identity. While this version of the Brat Pack is far removed from an actual American demographic, in awarding these actors with such handles, Blum responds to a demographic impulse by inventing descriptive categories to help moviegoers keep things straight. Nicolas Cage is

⁵¹ Although Anthony Michael Hall, a Brat Packer who appeared in Sixteen Candles, was hired for the lead and then fired by Kubrick after complaining too much about the director’s style. He then turned down the role of Bueller’s nebbish friend Cameron to “avoid being typecast.”

labeled “The Ethnic Chair,” and while Blum means to portray the group as heterogeneous, he only accentuates the lily-white nature of the bunch. In an insider’s explanatory voice, Blum writes that Cage’s “ethnic looks usually land him the part of brother or best friend” (“Hollywood’s” 43). Even this kind of racially offensive marker shows that for the Brat Pack, the individual actor’s importance lies mainly in his pseudo-demographic role. These actors are “*what* the kinds want to see” (my emphasis), not “*who* the kids want to see.” It is not a problem that these actors fail to distinguish themselves, for they are more successful when recuperated into a larger group identity.

The significance of this function, where youth identity is both collective and pseudo-individualized, is also seen in the key Brat Pack films, which strive to homogenize youth experience into a larger collective organism. When the Brat Pack works together in a film like St. Elmo’s Fire or The Breakfast Club, they demonstrate a youthful mimicry of and rebellion against an older generation’s emphasis on rigid social roles. For example, in Hughes’s The Breakfast Club, the five characters belong to one of five easily definable high school social categories: “a brain, a beauty, a jock, a rebel and a recluse.” Heading to detention, their parents’ cars help code for the audience the family’s class, which in turn provides the initial motivation for the kids’ behavior. At first, Hughes has the teens parody themselves and their perceived social roles by accentuating their economic toughness, or acting out their parents’ wealth, or simulating the contradictions of their moral upbringing. By more and more rigidly enforcing their own perceived role in the group, the characters begin an antagonistic morning that soon culminates in a realization that the differences they keenly perceive among themselves are in fact all reconcilable under the label of youth. Since their self-images are very much constructed and mediated by their roles as children in a stereotyped family, when placed together the teens find that

they are equally able to deconstruct their social roles. Discovering for the first time the contrived nature of their social lives, these youth refuse adult society's labels in favor of one of their own self-invention: the Breakfast Club.

This banding together of youth is significant to the 80s, even if it is soon obscured by cinematic overuse. The effect of the first stirrings of an independent American youth culture in the 50s, epitomized by James Dean's character in Nicholas Ray's Rebel Without a Cause (1955), is still in the 80s consciousness, but now, instead of fetishizing the lone male rebel, 80s brats come together in packs and clubs. Blum surely has some of this in mind when he uses a historical analogy to define the Hollywood Brat Pack; it "is to the 1980s what the Rat Pack was to the 1960s: a roving band of famous young stars on the prowl for parties, women, and a good time" ("Hollywood's" 42). The earlier Rat Pack, formed in the mid-1950s, most famously included Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop. Of course, the label "Brat Pack" only works because it is a direct rewriting of the mid-50s and -60s "Rat Pack," but for Blum the quiddity of the original Rat Pack is less important than the significance these two groups have for their respective generations. On the surface, the Rat Pack and the Brat Pack share little in common, so what they do share--youth, stardom, masculinity--is all the more important. In the absence of another James Dean, 80s Hollywood cinema forgoes the lone rebel of the 50s in favor of the collective pack; this is a marked shift in conceptions of adolescence and youth matched by an 80s emphasis on surface, irony, and parody.

In rewriting the Rat Pack to the Brat Pack, what journalists such as Blum do is twofold: by using the recent past to label and organize the present, they both privilege historical memory at the same time as they render the past less important. This attitude

is paradoxically much less reverent about a larger sense of history at the same as it privileges history for those able to get the references; rewriting Rat to Brat makes an *interest* in a historical reference clear, but this is only a very superficial interest, a sort of shallow history. The present is labeled from the past, with the result that this new label then replaces the past with present. In Blum's rewriting, we see the Brat Pack as instant history; an instantly recognizable association to the 50s or 60s suffices in place of the understanding of the actual historical record. Blum's first naming of the Hollywood Brat Pack is without the overt irony that later critics (such as Paul Rudnick) will employ to describe these 80s youth. For Blum, these actors are less Hollywood's joke than they are the illegitimate heirs to the stars of the 60s; abandoned by their families,⁵² reliant on and in competition with their colleagues, the Hollywood Brat Pack is the sociological marker of Hollywood's version of life's narrative: a cultured, urbanized Lord of the Flies (another example of analogous play with earlier decades, Golding's novel published in 1954 and Peter Brooks' film adaptation in 1964).

By portraying these young 80s actors as part of a Brat Pack not necessarily related to their paternal predecessors the Rat Pack, the popular press titillates its audience with tales of Hollywood nightlife at the same time as it expresses an anxiety over the collective aimlessness of these youth and the characters they play in movies. Rewriting Rat Pack to Brat Pack creates a diminutive meaning by which these terms pejoratively describe others. While the border between a demographic category (a label) and a moral category (an insult) is generally calculable by taking into consideration such variables as audience, subject, and environment, the fragile border crossing between a child's cuteness and a child's brattiness can be more fragile. Brat Pack history is childish history--mildly clever, "cute," collectible, and slightly hip in its references. In this

⁵² Some, like Estevez and Cage, create a self-imposed exile with a last name change.

conception of 80s youth culture (“what kids want to be”) is the kind of cute-to-some, irritating-to-others incongruity created by parents who dress up toddlers in age-inappropriate clothing or plaster them with political paraphernalia. Brat Packers weary quickly; what is acceptable in youth, or in small doses, or for the sake of kindness, soon breeds contempt and condescension. While the identification 50s filmgoers had with James Dean and Marlon Brando’s heroic characters demonstrated a stark vision of adolescence for both adult and youth audiences, the 80s Brat Pack rarely aims itself at adults. The “Brat Pack,” then, from the outset is a label of 80s teen cinema which is already tedious and tenuous.

II. The Literary Brat Pack

The themes raised by David Blum’s rewriting of the Rat Pack into the Hollywood Brat Pack--masculinity and group identity, the use of shallow history in order to periodize the present, diminutiveness and youth attitude--continually reappear during the 80s in an oblique fashion, twisted in further rewritings of the present and recent past. Resurrecting the Rat Pack as the Brat Pack moves us farther from understanding the operative reasons why such Packs are culturally relevant, and instead pushes us to simply decode and accept the label and its historical referents, satisfied at our cultural savvy (or, alternatively, worried at our lack of savvy). If the rewriting of the Rat Pack into the Brat Pack attests to an 80s sense of itself as some new type of historical object, “connected” to history through surface and not substance, then what is suggested when the newly-minted Hollywood Brat Pack itself breeds, one and a half years later, a “Literary Brat Pack”? Like the Hollywood Brat Pack, the Literary one refers to a young group of artists who suddenly captured much attention, critical and tabloid, at the very

beginning of their careers. Also like the Hollywood Brat Pack, the Literary Brat Pack refers both specifically to a core group of starter members and also more loosely to a type of person--precocious, marketable, perhaps even talented: a lauded tyro.

In this second rewriting of the original Rat Pack is an evident quickening of symbolic reference; the shifting of Rat to Brat to Literary Brat reveals a desperate need to grasp the present by means of culturally established reference to the prior generation's adolescence. Of course, finding resonance in the past is not a new way of understanding the present, but the accumulated speed with which the past becomes grist for the mill is unique. The unironic cannibalizing of the recent past is in fact so sped up that products such as "Brat Pack" quickly become references to a diverse group of fields, and before long Brats are everywhere. Paul Rudnick is the great chronicler of the Brat for SPY magazine, detailing scores of contemporary brats, such as women "brats with legs," "balding brats," "creative brats," "Betty Ford brats," and "political brats" ("Do Brats Have More Fun"). Also around this time, self-help books and articles like How To Raise a Brat and "The Boom in Brats" warned parents about indulgence and permissiveness while also warning the nation about the effects of adults' self-absorbed, workaholic yuppie lifestyles. Even on the sports page, Tatum O'Neal's tumultuous marriage to John McEnroe ("Baby 3 for Brat's Pack") continually helped cement the phrase in the media lexicon. In America's popular imagination, brats had become a worthy problem.

Such repetitions not only sped up the prevalence of the word brat, but consequently the shifting cultural relevance of brats. The Hollywood Brat Pack, only a moment ago a neologism, now becomes a legitimate historical referent itself--a cause to the Literary Brat Pack's effect. The disorienting effect on a culture's sense of self-periodization is addressed in a New York Review of Books group review of some

Literary Brat Packers: “That they seem of their periods demonstrates how time has accelerated, or how changes in style can make for distances” (Pinckney 14). “Making distance” is both the method and the goal here; whether time is accelerated or whether it is merely this time’s own fast style amounts to the same thing.

The first use of the phrase “literary brat pack” that I find is by Hilary DeVries in a 29 October 1985 piece on Jay McInerney in the Christian Science Monitor, where she writes of “the kind of overnight fame that characterizes the literary brat pack--that covey of under-30 novelists” (21). Beginning to make the shift to upper case, the next reference that I find connects the Literary Brat Pack and the Hollywood Brat Pack; Elizabeth Kastor writes about Tama Janowitz in the Washington Post on 29 August 1986 that “first time novelist Paul Rudnick . . . smilingly describes them as a sort of literary ‘Brat Pack’” (C1). Finally, the critic most responsible for establishing the second rewriting from Brat Pack to Literary Brat Pack (with full capitalization) is Bruce Bawer, a contributor to The New Criterion and film critic for The American Spectator. In a spring 1987 essay in Arrival titled “Taking on the Literary Brat Pack,”⁵³ Bawer is highly critical of the artistic merits of the pejoratively-termed Literary Brat Pack, which he sees dominating contemporary American fiction to the detriment of other, more deserving authors. As Bawer tells the story, it all began with the publication in 1984 of David Leavitt’s short story collection Family Dancing. Bawer comments that “at first the critics were lukewarm or indifferent. Then Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times gave Family Dancing a rave review--and the next thing one know, Leavitt and his stories were the talk of the literary world” (“Metropolitan” 382). According to Bawer, this success brought retroactive critical attention to other young fiction writers such as Meg

⁵³ Bawer takes the opportunity to reproduce the main points of this article on the occasion of a later book review of Peter Cameron’s Leap Year in Metropolitan. Since the two articles are substantially similar (although the second piece’s past tense tone is more “I-told-you-so”), I will treat them simultaneously.

Wolitzer, Peter Cameron, Susan Minot, Elizabeth Tallent, Marian Thurm, and “one or two others” (“Taking on” 53); the cementing of the popularity of this crop of authors then occurred with the “astonishingly glowing terms” of a New York Times Book Review’s front page, “unequivocally positive review” of Minot’s Monkeys (“Metropolitan” 383), and Leavitt’s National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction for Family Dancing. This leads Bawer to his christening of these authors:

So great, in fact, is the disparity between the public image and the performance that one is tempted to refer to this overly hyped circle of writers as the Literary Brat Pack. . . . Like the Hollywood Brat Pack, they have an overweening sense of their own importance in the scheme of things, and--by means of the enthusiastic blurbs and reviews that many of them have given to each other--have helped to distract the attention of their audience from many of their more deserving contemporaries. Like the Hollywood Brat Pack, finally, the members of the Literary Brat Pack have one outstanding skill: they promote themselves extremely well. (“Taking on” 53)

In hindsight, Bawer sees the genesis of the Literary Brat Pack as a rather crude and easy-to-follow plot, and it is for this reason that he is all the more baffled by the possibility that such a thing could have happened on the front page of the New York Times Book Review. Bawer allows for a difference between “public image” and “performance,” but the excessiveness of this difference is striking. And while he is not explicit on this point, there is in Bawer’s writing evident frustration at an audience who would let itself be distracted by such an undeserving group. These kids’ *de rigueur* blind sense of self-importance and unabashed self-promotion is symptomatic of youth’s folly, but the erstwhile critics who have failed in their mission to read a “performance” outside of a

“public image” are even more to blame; the indignity to American fiction prompted by these unruly brats is simply unacceptable.

Responding mainly to the unnoticed confusion between “public image” and “performance,” Bawer’s intervention was prompted by an article by David Leavitt titled “New Voices and Old Values” which appeared in the 22 May 1985 New York Times. “New Voices and Old Values” is a program piece (that is, both performance and public image) for the newer authors, and as such is an example of the sort of self-promotion that irritates Bawer so much. Although Leavitt does not include himself among these new authors (a fact Bawer is quick to suspiciously point out), he clearly belongs with the other Literary Brat Packers. Leavitt attempts to provide a reading of “a new generation of writers who are recording through their fiction the changes in the way young people think about family, marriage, love and loyalty” (“New Voices” BR1), specifically Maria Thurm, Elizabeth Tallent, Peter Cameron, Meg Wolitzer, and Amy Hempel.

Since Bawer sees Leavitt’s piece as only so much self-promotion, he takes most of his cues from Leavitt, continually quoting from “New Voices and Old Values,” which Bawer calls “the principal document in the study of the Literary Brat Pack” (“Taking on” 53). One problem highlighted by Bawer’s strategy is that Bawer and Leavitt seem simply to disagree on the significance of certain criticisms. For example, Bawer takes the following statement of Leavitt’s: “What these writers share is not only their youth--there are many other notable young writers whose work differs vastly from theirs--but their predilections and obsessions, both in style and content” (“New Voices” BR1-26). Bawer summarizes for the potentially hoodwinked reader: “There’s a shorter, blunter way of putting all this, of course. Namely: ‘All of us Literary Brat Packers write exactly alike.’ Well, *almost* exactly. Almost everything they do derives directly from Carver, Robison,

and--perhaps most of all--Beattie" ("Taking on" 54). Compare that last sentence to Leavitt's version: "stylistically, their work owes a strong debt to older writers such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and Mary Robison" ("New Voices" BR26). What is a virtue for Leavitt, a coherent expression of a patterned rereading and rewriting of a strong tradition of American literature, is for Bawer a shameful admission that these young authors have fallen for the baser impulses of quick and easy fiction. Practically rephrasing Leavitt, Bawer unintentionally makes clear that what is at stake actually concerns not the performance of literary ambition or youthful artistic style, but instead the public image of these young fiction writers as a new gang who, in their collective strength, aim to consolidate power under the Literary Brat Pack label.

Bawer has three specific complaints about the Literary Brat Pack: 1) the homogeneity of both Brat Pack authors and Brat Pack characters (their subject matter), 2) the "arbitrary specifics" of pop cultural reference that Brat Pack authors use to develop their characters (their style), and 3) these Brat Pack author's youthful arrogance in the popular press (their public image).

Bawer's most direct complaint is his first, and he relishes in reducing all Brat Pack short stories to one archetypal sentence's length. For example, every character went through the same

familiar baby-boom paces: They began lives of their own in the big city (usually New York), working in publishing houses or second-hand clothing stores; they had colorful, frustrating love affairs (invariably with other upper-middle-class, suburban-reared baby-boomers); they came out of the closet to their families; they watched their aging mothers divorce or come down with cancer or die.

("Metropolitan" 381)

Because of their sameness, Bawer is unimpressed with what would ordinarily be meaningful life events--relationships, sexuality, a parent's death--and dismisses them with the tag "baby-boom paces" of "the superficial yuppie sensibility of the 1980s" ("Metropolitan" 380). In real life, these may be emotionally significant events, but in the closed world of the Literary Brat Pack they become merely clichéd and incestuous. That these paces are already overly familiar in the baby boom 80s is one criticism, that these paces are familiarly overworked in Brat Pack fiction is yet another. "All the sensitive young gay men seemed to be the *same* sensitive young gay man" Bawer complains, "all the intelligent, distant, emotionally self-protective mothers seemed to be the *same* intelligent, distant, emotionally self-protective mother" ("Metropolitan" 381). Bawer is manifestly frustrated at any hint of self-pity, which he reads as exaggerated self-importance--coming out of the closet is nothing big, a mother's dying of cancer is passé. For him, these authors fail to distinguish themselves because they fail to consider that their subject matter is not interesting enough on its own to warrant attention.⁵⁴

Bawer even goes so far as to typologize, for the sake of the Literary Brat Packers and those duped by their critical success, the limited range of experience these fictions deal with:

There are about four basic Brat Pack story themes: the folks' divorce . . . , the troubled relationship with Mom . . . , the frustrations of romance . . . , and dead or dying mothers. . . . Many of these mothers die of cancer, and in fact cancer is a particularly popular topic in Brat Pack fiction: in one story after another, characters talk about their chemotherapy, undergo tests, or mention friends with leukemia. ("Taking on" 54)

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that two gay men are at the center of this early debate, while the later, more popular Brat Pack authors (Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, and Tama Janowitz) each write texts that are either repressively straight or parodically homosocial.

Here, the sense of numbing sameness involves not what the Brat Pack characters make of their lives, but more fundamentally what initially constitutes their homogenous identities. Since childhood or the fallout from childhood is such a repeated touchstone, the Literary Brat Pack in their early adulthood naturally focus on themes relating to their parents: romance, relationship, death. This is less a criticism of a young generation's attitude towards the 80s and more a criticism of their parents' fault in creating these brats. It is surprising that Bawer emphasizes this thematic sameness, yet fails to consider how such a close range of focus indicates some larger cultural feeling, instead attributing it simply to a lack of creativity.

Worse still for Bawer, all this sameness of subject matter is foregrounded by a stylistic sameness:

Sometimes the only noticeable differences are the external ones--the names they go by, the TV shows they watch. Read enough Brat Pack stories in a row and the young characters begin to run together in your mind--and the same goes for their mothers and their fathers, their apartments and their jobs, their parents' divorces and cancer cases. ("Taking on" 54)

For Bawer, fictional characters need to be individualized, quirky in their own internally particular ways. By only using external markers of difference, the reader is not given the psychological clues needed to flesh out a character's inner life; instead we get TV shows, pop songs, and cologne brands. The most humorous example Bawer offers is the list of T-shirts which Literary Brat Packers love to use: anatomical figures, Coke ads (one English, one Arabic), Disney World, New York subway maps, Star Wars, rock bands, and one that reads "The Only Safe Fast Breeder Is a Rabbit" ("Taking on" 55). The Literary Brat Pack's limited palette, built around Coke t-shirts and Mannix and GQ, reveals yet

again that bratty self-importance beneath their writing, and the superficial details do disservice to their already boresome themes. Picking objects over consciousness, “arbitrary specifics” (Leavitt’s phrase, twisted in Bawer) instead of pointed observations, the Literary Brat Pack doubly shows their immaturity.

There are actually two debates present in this criticism. The first finds Bawer criticizing these authors for privileging surface over depth. This, of course, involves the much broader argument about what is generally labeled postmodernism. The other, more pointed debate involves the teaching of fiction writing and how fiction is produced for publication in the 80s. Bawer is only one of a number of critics who have commented on the rise in the 80s of what is derogatorily called “workshop fiction,” characterized best by the authors Leavitt admires and Bawer impugns: Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie. Particularly misguided is the new advice to “load up on concrete details, relevant or not” (“Taking on” 54), which has the effect that “Brat Pack writers are more likely to give a detailed run-down on the contents of a given character’s cupboard or clothes or television viewing schedule than to provide a coherent and convincing set of clues to the contents of that character’s soul” (“Taking on” 54). These brats do not leave clues to the soul, instead they check out their buddies’ bookshelves and closets. That this practice is so widespread is even more shocking to Bawer: “such coincidences bespoke . . . a bizarre corporate commitment, on the part of all the Literary Brat Packers, to a very constricted realm of subjects styles, and characters” (“Metropolitan” 383).

“Corporate commitment” is a key phrase here, as Bawer uses it to shift the Literary Brat Pack into a framework that he and other older critics can understand. It may be useful to note Bawer’s age; in 1987 when he published “Taking on the Literary Brat Pack” he was 31 and Leavitt was 25. The slight difference in age may be significant.

While both men are of the baby boom generation, the instantaneity of the Literary Brat Pack which is so irksome to Bawer serves to further separate the two; as with all gangs or packs, those on the outside find it impossible to gain entry. Mixing this with the economic metaphor of the Reagan 80s, Bawer suggests that the Literary Brat Pack may model themselves along the structure of the corporation. He has already protested their shamelessly intermingled self-promotion, and by calling it a “bizarre corporate commitment,” Bawer further suggests that the Literary Brat Pack misunderstand the way in which a real corporation works--another example of these brats dressing up in their spiritual parents’ clothes and uncritically adopting older authors’ voices, without the slightest nod to their predecessors.

While Bawer’s age provides a tantalizingly inconclusive avenue to understanding his criticism (is he just jealous?), the more Bawer writes about the Literary Brat Pack, the clearer he makes his hatred for them. For example, one of many scathing remarks about these kids’ single most irritating collective characteristic: namely, their insularity, their smugness, their fatuous certainty that--in a country populated by a quarter of a billion people--they and their tepid, adolescent little fictions represent the future of the national literature. (“Taking on” 55)

Bawer is drawn towards hating these young fiction writers, and it is often on such grounds of protecting a literary tradition (and watching out for its future) that detractors have made their stand against the Literary Brat Pack. Unsurprisingly, though, enthusiasts as well as shameless self-promoters have used these same grounds to make the case for the importance of the Literary Brat Pack’s continuation of the tradition of American literature. Some of this is self-serving--Paris Review editor Mona Simpson compared the Literary Brat Pack scene to Middlemarch (James, “New York’s” A51); and some is not--

Bawer wonders if Peter Cameron may not be “a yuppie Thackeray” (“Metropolitan”). Often though, the Literary Brat Pack is portrayed as performing an 80s “fast lane” rewrite of specific novelistic traditions and tropes, such as the novel of manners, the “anatomy-of-a-loser” and his comic “knight-errantry,” and the lost weekend (cf. Pinckney, Stubblefield, Wolff). Since these themes typically involve a male character’s entrée into society, often represented by New York City or a college campus, the specific model most often invoked is J.D. Salinger’s: “Holden Caulfield’s progeny are everywhere in American fiction” (Pinckney 12). Specifically, Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City is often directly compared to The Catcher in the Rye (1951), as well as to Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim (1954), Saul Bellow’s The Adventures of Augie March (1953), and Truman Capote’s Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1958) (cf. Dobyns; MacDougall; Kakutani, “Slave of New York”).⁵⁵

While authors from the 1950s gave critics of the Literary Brat Pack an immediate point of comparison, the American 1980s is most convincingly similar to the 1920s. This is often quite self-conscious; for example, Leavitt titles an essay he wrote for Esquire (this time, about himself) “The New Lost Generation,” with the sub-headline “It’s post-Sixties, pre-Eighties, and forever in between” (“The New Lost” 85). The Lost Generation of the Roaring Twenties, and in particular its literary representative F. Scott Fitzgerald, operates as a mythically identical time and place to 80s New York. David Blum, now writing about the Literary Brat Pack, notes one author’s connection to the Twenties; “like McInerney, F. Scott Fitzgerald was obsessed with himself and the times he lived in” (“Slave of New York” 46). McInerney himself seems to agree: “People are waiting for me to pull a kind of a Fitzgerald in *my* life and die of an overdose” (McInerney qtd. in “The

⁵⁵ Although some of these have more to do with the threat of an author’s unfulfilled early promise, than of stylistic or thematic similarities.

Slave of New York” 40). Even Gary Fisketjon, the influential editor who created *Vintage Contemporaries* and launched McInerney’s career, “is--or perhaps would just like to seem--a throwback to the great book and magazine editors of the Twenties and Thirties” (Carter 162). Elizabeth Young agrees, including another Literary Brat Packer: “If Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney had a literary forerunner, it is surely F. Scott Fitzgerald” (17).⁵⁶ In a bit of retroactive criticism, Young argues that Fitzgerald is so often mentioned because “he is probably closer to the ambitious young New York writers of the eighties such as Ellis than any of the other writers--Kerouac, Salinger--associated with youth culture in the intervening years” (18). Associating Fitzgerald with Ellis, and not the other way around, paints Fitzgerald as someone ahead of his time, while simultaneously painting the Literary Brat Packers as fulfilling the Lost Generation’s spiritual mission, begun with the Great War and really only slightly interrupted by the intervening decades. Young explains the similarities, “The twenties were, like the eighties, a decade of extremely conspicuous consumption for moneyed, status-conscious pleasure-seekers and there was an enormous gulf between them and the underprivileged masses in American society” (18). The exclusivity of the enormous gulf, primarily economic although superficially perceivable as a cultural difference, remains in the 80s; “the loser of the Eighties, however, is faking it. He can become a winner in the nick of time” (Pinckney 14).

Perhaps because of the Jazz Age similarities, critics and reviewers searching for a Literary Brat Pack continuity with a tradition of American fiction tend to emphasize generational conflict, class consciousness, and the down-and-out individual. On the surface, these dingy themes would seem to contradict the clichéd 80s--wealthy,

⁵⁶ And Young’s coauthor, Caveney, is tempted to compare McInerney and John Dos Passos with “a tidy equation between the twenties and eighties” (Caveney 43).

conspicuous, mobile; however, there is an evident pride of place for authors who write in the down-and-out vein *despite* the glitz of the 80s. In the Eighties, there is perhaps an especial bravery in admitting, say, that one's mother has cancer, or that one's parents are divorcing.

Like Blum's Hollywood Brat Pack, the Literary Brat Pack was a term so media-friendly that it instantly flew out of Bawer's hands, later becoming a quasi-endearing term for three writers in particular, instead of a damning label for a new generation of "workshop fiction" writers who have not spent enough time in the trenches. Of course, most of these later articles focused on the "public image" of the Literary Brat Pack more than the "performance," and soon, the authors that Bawer originally wrote about were for the most part ignored in favor of flashier authors like Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, and Bret Easton Ellis, who (with the occasional mention of David Leavitt) are the three now most associated with the Literary Brat Pack.⁵⁷ Bawer's neglect of Ellis, McInerney, and Janowitz should not be read as a mistake. By writing primarily in response to Leavitt's "New Voices and Old Values," Bawer constrains himself to short story writers who are more or less entirely unrelated to McInerney, Ellis, and Janowitz. Actually, as has been consistently pointed out, not even those three have all that much in common; their similarities are best described not by their fiction, but by their appearances on Page Six. Janowitz complains, "I don't know why people compare. [McInerney's] characters live in New York and go to clubs, so do mine. That's all" (qtd. in Kastor C1). But Kastor disagrees, "in the eyes of many readers and reviewers, Janowitz does fit into a current genealogy of young fiction writers milking a national desire for a certain deadpan hipness" (C1). Problematically, and underlying Janowitz's protest, is the idea of this

⁵⁷ In fact, Caveney and Young claim that Ellis, McInerney, and Janowitz were the *only* Brat Pack authors (16).

group having a genealogy. Labeling it “a current genealogy” is a way of familializing the Literary Brat Pack and reducing their originality; these are not just people stuck in a room--they are tangibly related. In the same piece, we hear that “Janowitz is being called ‘the female Jay McInerney,’ a comparison all the more telling for its time and generation specificity” (Kastor C1). The sobriquet “the female Mr. X” is distastefully common in publishing and literary criticism, but here it points up a distinction between Bawer’s Pack and Kastor’s “current genealogy.” Janowitz, as a woman author and thus an imitator, can never really be a part of Ellis and McInerney’s pack; instead she is primarily part of a genealogy. Kastor continues: “Bright Lights seemed to establish a new breed of books--Late Baby Boom literature” (C1). With his establishment of a “new breed of books,” McInerney takes on confusingly generative possibilities. If Janowitz is “the female McInerney,” she is so as a daughter, and not as a mother or lover. Indeed, McInerney’s breed has no mother; if Carver and Beattie are the grandparents, it is McInerney alone who begets the Literary Brat Pack and its genealogical possibilities.

Further reviewers’ efforts at “packing” McInerney, Ellis, and Janowitz also cannot avoid genealogical metaphors. In particular is the common strategy where reviewers connect contemporary authors by borrowing one author’s book titles for reviews of another author’s books. So, while Janowitz is called “the female McInerney,” McInerney is also slyly associated with Janowitz when Blum titles his piece on McInerney’s Story of My Life, “Slave of New York,” reversing the Janowitz-McInerney influences. Furthermore, two reviews of McInerney’s first novel Bright Lights, Big City--“The Fast Lane” and “Jay McInerney Enters the Literary Fast Lane”--both refer in their titles to Jayne Anne Phillips’s short story collection Fast Lanes, published shortly before McInerney’s first novel.

Since Bawer did not address McInerney, Janowitz, or Ellis, his mantle is taken up by Jonathan Yardley, who repeats Bawer's refrain: "What all four [Ellis, McInerney, Janowitz, Leavitt] have in common is that their first (or, in Janowitz's case, second) books were praised far out of proportion to their actual merits and sold uncommonly well for fiction by unknown writers" (Yardley B2). We are returned to the source of all of Bawer's complaints, the meaning of which is contained in his initial temptation "to refer to this overly hyped circle of writers as the Literary Brat Pack" ("Taking on" 53). In Bawer's feigned reticence ("one is tempted") is something more significant than any of the criticisms he makes. On the one hand, Bawer overstates his case for the sake of rallying a defense to a threat to American letters. On the other hand, most of these complaints are valid and are later borne out by other critical and commercial reassessments of the Literary Brat Pack. However, throughout Bawer's writing--and particularly in that phrase "one is tempted . . ."--there is an anxiety moving beyond just the fiction. Bawer has to recognize that what he attacks as unjustified hype will only grow in proportion to the attention his formulation is paid. Despite his pejorative intent, his label is at first recognizable as a descriptive one, and if anything, Bawer's piece inaugurates an even greater period of the kind of fiction he despises; intending to destroy the Literary Brat Pack, Bawer had first to define them, and in doing so, he ensured that they would remain. This is more than just the critic's mistake, for it is here that the real problem comes out: the only appropriate response Bawer and others can come up with is that these kids are simply brats. And thus, what he introduces as new is precisely what he creates: a pack of literary brats.

III. America's Brat Pack

So, what is involved in such a formulation as the Literary Brat Pack, once it moves from pejorative to descriptive? In the following, I will look at some popular press responses to the Literary Brat Pack (unfortunately, academic criticism has almost entirely shied away from this phenomenon). Looking past a simplistic reading of "The Literary Brat Pack" as only a media-friendly marketing label, we see that the Literary Brat Pack, taken from Bawer, is actually a rather successful piece of cultural criticism. What it reveals about both speaker and object shifts between multiple registers: it is a dysphemistic marker of precocity, a newly collectivized experience of self, and a mode of relations to the American family in the 80s. Of course, the first subject position to keep in mind is the newly self-made yuppie audience. To get the resonance of the jokes about the new brats, a yuppie needs to be above the Brat Pack in order to "slum it"; at the same time the yuppie is drawn to the Brat Pack because it tells of the yuppie's recent past. In many ways, that is what being a yuppie is all about--avoiding one's recent past so it does not interfere with one's newly-minted present.

First, the phrase "Literary Brat Pack" sounds more dysphemistic than derogatory, as it utilizes the term brat to indicate youthful precocity and so becomes an ambivalently useful cultural label instead of simply a disparaging phrase. While Bawer was clear with his own intentions, shifting notions about youth and success lead others to contradictory feelings about this precocity. For example, one early reviewer seems ambivalent about the correlation of age and success:

Some hot reviews [of Bright Lights, Big City] and a slot on the bestseller list generated the kind of overnight fame that characterizes the literary brat pack--that covey of under-30 novelists, including Lorrie Moore and Bret Easton Ellis, among

others. Their sheer youth has made them something of a publishing trend.

(DeVries 21)

What is most striking is the final sentence, with its overstated phrase “sheer youth.”

What can be particularly “sheer” about youth is unanswered, but the threat is clear--

youth need no other qualifications.⁵⁸ While “sheer youth” certainly cannot be called a

new trend, precocity always being commercially successful, youth becomes much more

noticeable with the Literary Brat Pack. For example, in a 1988 piece in The Review of

Contemporary Fiction, David Foster Wallace deals with what he calls “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young”:

The metronome of literary fashion looks to be set on *presto*. Beginning with the high-profile appearances of David Leavitt’s *Family Dancing*, Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, the last three-odd years saw a veritable explosion of good-willed critical and commercial interest in literary fiction by Conspicuously Young writers. (36)

What is striking for Wallace is the conspicuousness of these authors’ ages--*Conspicuous*

Youth is public, large, booming. Not only are there numerically more youth post-Baby

Boom, but these youth are also larger in the public imagination. Wallace demonstrates

their Blakean reversal of values: “certain honored traditions of starvation and

apprenticeship were reversed: writers’ proximity to their own puberties seemed now an

asset” (36). In these criticisms of the dreariness of contemporary fiction, Wallace’s piece

is somewhat similar to Bawer’s piece (he gives us three central plots instead of four).

The difference is that Wallace takes the long view, seeing a younger author’s conspicuous

⁵⁸ This needs to be qualified, taking into consideration how race, class, and gender are also fundamental in constituting the American sense of an author. If I lump all youths together to make a point about the Literary Brat Pack (mostly male, mostly white, mostly straight, mostly upper-middle class), I do so not to minimize these other considerations but rather to add to them the category of youth.

efforts as an invigorating sign that American literature will have a healthy future.

In addition to banking on the high profile of these brats' youth, publishers also began to more consciously pack them together. The story begins with the biggest publishing success of the 80s--Vintage Contemporaries.⁵⁹ Gary Fisketjon, an old friend of McInerney's, was given his own line at Vintage, and "what Fisketjon did with the Vintage Contemporaries line was create a form of name-brand publishing for baby-boomers" ("Gliterary Life" 162). Under Fisketjon's Vintage Contemporaries, Literary Brat Pack authors were aimed at an audience who would respond to lower prices, a uniform and collectable look, and a fabricated but built-in literary merit (via a backlist and symbiotic author blurbs). Fisketjon's plan for the first catalogue of 1984 was to repackage older books which had not sold well, with the addition of one new book-- McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City. He would break tradition by putting this first novel out as a trade paperback with a lower price than hardbacks. Most important, the packaging of Vintage Contemporaries would ensure their mutual success; each work would be able to piggyback off of the success of other works by featuring identical layouts, typography, cover art, and author blurbs. The effect was striking, "only it didn't really look like a book. The design, with its pointillist grid and letter-spaced type, looked more like an album cover: perfect for his audience" (Carter 165). Fisketjon's clever dissimulation of an album cover increased the novels' visibility while branding a new type of reader.

Specifically discussing Bright Lights, Big City, Hendrik Hertzberg comments on the dramatic effect of these covers: "it would have been a . . . minor classic [but] since it originally sold over three hundred thousand copies and was the beneficiary of a shrewd marketing campaign that presented it as a cross between a compact disc and a SoHo

⁵⁹ See Stephanie Girard, who goes into much more detail than I can here, and includes photographic comparisons of various first editions of Vintage Contemporaries.

restaurant, it has been the target of much sour comment” (Hertzberg 105). This “sour comment,” tinged with jealousy and a sense of undeserved attention, is suspicious of the way these books create their new, contrived form of group identification. However, “for a generation raised on baseball cards and Barbie costumes, Vintage Contemporaries have become the latest thing to collect” (Carter 162). Like baseball cards and Barbie costumes, the cover of these novels follow a standard template, with minimal, stylized variation. The assumed connection between the boilerplate outer surface and the unread inner surfaces does a disservice to the readers’ expectations of the texts. However, the increased visibility of these novels when placed side by side on a bookshelf adds to the pleasure of those who enjoy collecting.⁶⁰

These novels, popularly known from some of those sour comments as “yuppiebacks,” bespeak of guilty pleasures and addictions. For this reason, they are almost the opposite of Linda Hutcheon’s thesis of what a postmodern novel contains: a “complicitous critique.” In the case of the Literary Brat Pack, there is much complicity on the part of the presumed Baby Boomer and Yuppie audience. While the immense success of these novels may not have much to do with literary merit (what percentage of novels are successful primarily for literary reasons?), they also represent something more than a fad. Their short chapters, abundant cultural references, and humorous narratives all add up to the fact that their slightness is a virtue; “they are all clever, topical, timely, and ironic--the David Lettermans of the written word” (Kastor C1). These qualities help to collectivize notions of self under the Brat Pack rubric. As such, the label the Literary Brat Pack works in favor of the forms of consumerist identification that a yuppie society operates by: the interchangeability of desire (if you like Product X, you’ll probably like

⁶⁰ Consider also the Library of America, another collectible series whose first volumes were published 1982.

Product Y), the media possibilities in the fabricated “new thing,” the branded surface packaging, the familiarity of the popular, the impulse to self-label the current “scene,” and the selling of the promise of Youth.

Connecting the outward appearance of these novels to the similarity of their themes, critic Josephine Hendin sees a correlation between such activities as collecting and collectivizing. In “Fictions of Acquisition,” she examines “youthcult fiction,” by which she describes the “heroes and antiheroes propelled toward mythic stature by an avid college market. [These] cult heroes dramatize the ethos of the day” (217).

Comparing such fiction of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, Hendin finds 80s youth fiction impotent:

the comparable fiction of the 1980s seems to be giving up the counterculture attack on adulthood, authority, and repression. There is in progress a quiet but sharp recoil from the concepts of self and society, from the quest for authentic emotion, from the visions of individualism and possibility that have been animating forces in our literature. (217)

Like Bawer, Hendin sees a similarity in much contemporary youth fiction; however, she views this similarity as a withdrawal, a similarity of quietude and abnegation. She argues that “the youthcult novels of the 1980s reflect an enormous shift” from earlier youth fiction because 80s fiction has lost an individualized “sense of social or generational conflict or advocacy of a hedonistic, experiential ethic at variance with the competitive work ethic of American culture” (Hendin 220). Characters of youthcult fiction of the past (Hendin names Holden Caulfield among others) successfully demonstrated such rebellion against society, work, or one’s parents, but the youth fiction of the 80s does none of these. Instead, the numbing sameness of superficial details, or drug use, or pop

cultural reference, replaces any sense of generational counterculture.

This is Bawer's fear; homogenization, especially homogenized passivity, is a threat, while an individuality born of antagonism is a virtue. Hendin argues that "this youth fiction of personal life has been criticized for being insufficiently true to individual differences and for accepting commercially viable, collectivized notions of self" (224). The apathetic, docile nature of the Literary Brat Pack is disturbing to many critics. Instead of differentiating their characters, Brat Pack authors eschew the chance to make their characters unique, and instead buy into a "collectivized notion of self" that fails to push forward the genre of the novel. And since their characters are not differentiated, it seems that neither are the authors. One criticism, then, is that these authors are undeserving and immature, another is that these authors simply see culture as being increasingly standardized and collectivized, and, as producers of culture, are further responsible for this tendency.

If the Literary Brat Pack cannot be seen as representing a countercultural movement, then their grouping together is even more striking. On the surface, few would see anything wrong in being part of a literary pack, but from what point of view are these authors also Brats? In the third register of "brat pack" there is a state of relations with parents that is key to understanding what Hendin sees as the recoil in youth fiction. Tapping into a notion of "brattiness" that best characterizes the fundamentally bothersome 80s American relationship between parents and children, the label "Literary Brat Pack" flirts with a maturity and independence characterized paradoxically by its dependence on parents and authority. "Brat," in its calling to mind an unruly child, both raises the parents' specter at the same time as it buries it. Brats are aggressive, brats are precocious, brats are of a certain age chronologically and socially (their sexual age, their

emotional age, their mental age--these are irrelevant). In short, brats are brats in a social sphere, and their behavior can say both something specific about their parents (“Tommy is a brat, but look how his parents spoil him”) as well as something general about their larger cultural upbringing (“All yuppie puppies are brats,” or “the children of yuppies are brats”).

When we speak of brats, we are also speaking of parents, and in particular mothers, who are invariably blamed for how their children turn out. Recall that Bawer noticed an emphasis on mothers as a key constitutive element of Brat Pack fiction: “the folks’ divorce . . . , the troubled relationship with Mom . . . , the frustrations of romance . . . , and dead or dying mothers” (“Taking on” 54). The editors of the satirical magazine SPY make this clear in their 1989 Cliffs Notes parody, Spy Notes, where they ridicule the “hip urban novel” genre of the Literary Brat Pack, especially poking fun at McInerney, Janowitz, and Ellis. Through the quasi-academic Cliffs Notes style, they continually parody the Brat Pack’s dead mothers: “Each protagonist had a mother who died. And so on” (Editors i). Borrowing from Tolstoy, they point out how “every unhappy family, in fact, is unhappy in the same way, because the mother is dead or dying” (Editors 65). In a mock quiz, they ask

Eleven of the 15 books in the genre use the *dead mother* plot device. Is this because

- a) in the 1980s most young people’s mothers died before the young people turned 25?
- b) most of the authors are still at the age when they hate their parents?
- c) each author was convinced that his or her own adolescence was much more traumatic than everyone else’s, and a fictional dead mother is a convenient gambit

to justify misbehavior and whininess? (Editors 76-7)

Earlier, SPY contributor Paul Rudnick wrote about the role mothers played in the fiction of the Literary Brat Pack, making “a callous observation: they’re dropping like flies” (“Missing Mommies” 54). While there are other narrative possibilities, like divorce, for a Literary Brat Pack character’s “misbehavior and whininess,” “the death of a parent is the primal shock, the first horror, the scabrous awakening” (“Missing Mommies” 54). Indeed, if there is anything connecting this disparate group of novelists and short story writers together, it is truly this one detail.

The brat, then, in the 80s marks out three registers of youthful subjectivity, serving as a negatively euphemistic marker of precocity (and raising concerns about the conspicuousness of youth), a newly collectivized experience of self (packaged for the masses in similarly unusual-looking books), and a mode of relations to the American family in the 80s (focusing on the child’s imagination of the mother’s death). While a thorough sociological and literary comparison of the youth of the Eighties to the youth of the Fifties is outside the scope of this project, I agree wholly with Josephine Hendin’s diagnosis that 80s youth have lost the image of the lone, iconoclastic rebel popular in their parents’ youth.⁶¹ In its place are these brats and their packs. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that these texts have not been examined more carefully in a cross-generational light since the singular common trope of the Literary Brat Pack--the dead or dying mother--resonates so profoundly with movements in feminism in the 70s and 80s. Assuming that there are other answers than the three that SPY gives above, what is it about the mother in the 80s that made her brats so repetitively imagine her death?

In order to answer this question, I shall turn now to a reading of a Literary Brat

⁶¹ This loss becomes even keener in 90s “Generation X” and slacker fiction, which more aggressively gives up on the myth of the rebel without a cause while simultaneously providing a less desperate reaction to authority.

Pack novel. Of the three authors most definitively identified with the Literary Brat Pack (Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, and Jay McInerney), McInerney with his first novel Bright Lights, Big City (1984) stands at the summa of the genre, for it has all of the necessary, archetypal thematic elements: early success and the promise of youth, popular culture and the evocation of a “scene,” and a son and his dead mother. In short, Bright Lights, Big City is *the* representative novel of the yuppiebacks. It is so for commercial reasons: it quickly sold over three hundred thousand copies, it secured the success of Vintage Contemporaries and the yuppieback phenomenon, it was made into a 1988 film starring Michael J. Fox, a 1999 off-Broadway musical, and a new 2005 studio cast recording, and it helped start some careers (Bret Easton Ellis, a friend and fellow Brat Packer) and kickstart others (Don DeLillo, whose early novels were republished in Vintage Contemporaries). Secondly, it is so for cultural and historical reasons: it features a newly-made yuppie brat stranded in jet-set New York at the height of an 80s club scene, it includes insider details on fashion modeling, publishing, dance clubs, cocaine use, riding the subway, and other prurient behaviors available to Manhattanites. Thirdly, it is *the* representative novel because it fits directly into the brat mold which critics like Bawer and Hendin saw as distinctly 80s; the novel problematizes collectivized notions of self by focusing on superficial details at the exclusion of the protagonist’s inner life, and it not only obsesses about mothers throughout, but culminates with a brat’s memory of the deathbed scene of his mother dying of cancer.

IV. Mom’s Brat - Bright Lights, Big City

Bright Lights, Big City follows a week in the life of an unnamed protagonist, beginning and ending at Sunday’s dawn in New York City. The novel is written in the

second person,⁶² and follows a familiar anatomy-of-a-loser pattern, as the narrator continually fails in relationships, at his work, and among the members of his social scene. At the novel's opening, we learn that the narrator has lied to everyone about being dumped by his wife Amanda, and with the aid of his hedonistic friend Tad Allagash, he treats himself to lots of cocaine, nightclubs, and bootless one-night stands. The effect of all this excess is that the narrator is about to lose his job in the Department of Factual Verification of a thinly-veiled magazine (the New Yorker). Soon, he is scandalously interrupting Amanda's fashion shows, hiding a ferret in his ex-boss's office, and striking up impossible relationships with one random woman after another, each of which he invests with much deeper significance than is actually present.

The reader is first led to believe that the main cause of the narrator's problems is his being abandoned by his fashion-model wife, Amanda. Bits of Amanda and their unreal relationship appear throughout the novel, and McInerney seems to attribute this yuppie brat's dissolution to the state of yuppiedom in general; this is simply what happens when one leads an amoral, shallow life. The novel's key element, though, turns out to be one most assiduously avoided by both the narrator and the author. McInerney treats the true source of the narrator's downfall, revealed in the novel's closing, as if he were writing a Hitchcockian thriller; in the vein of Marnie, there are MacGuffins (the job doesn't really matter, nor does Amanda), there are mysteriously recurring background characters (just why does the narrator keep avoiding his younger brother Michael?), there are abundant, potent symbols (a "Coma Baby," bread, store mannequins), and finally there is the penultimate flashback scene, in which all is revealed in close, psychosexual terms. It is

⁶² I will refer to this character as "the narrator," leaving the second-person "you" when it appears in quotations. See Girard, Kotzwinkle, and Hoffman for readings of McInerney's decision to use the second person. In passing, I will note that generally the second person aggressively displaces the lack of identifiable character onto the reader.

not until the novel's end that the keystone relationship in Bright Lights, Big City is revealed to actually be the one with the narrator's mother; the one-year anniversary of her death from cancer falls on the book's last day.

Because the narrator so continually refuses to think or discuss his mother's death, even lying about it at one point (Bright 95), the discovery that there is another, deeper reason for the narrator's collapse is quite surprising to the reader. Thus, more than one reviewer has complained that McInerney holds back a little too much a little too late. "At the end, a revelation of a greater grief doesn't fit all that went before. A rereading shows that McInerney tried to hint at it, but the reader hasn't been properly prepared" (MacDougall B5, also cf. Moran 42 and "Bright Lights, Big City" 76). The surprise ending confused reviewers, who thus tended to dismiss or ignore the scene with Mom; for example, Josephine Hendin writes it off with a refrain we have heard before: in 80s Brat Pack fiction, "not even a dying mother runs deep" (219).

Yet despite the fact, even because of the fact, that McInerney mishandles the deathbed scene, Bright Lights, Big City remains unequivocally pointed in this direction. The narrator's "night shift" vigil to his mother's death, and their final conversation, becomes the new ordinary scene; in hindsight it generates quite directly everything that chronologically follows. While the ending may be unearned, McInerney's workmanlike strategy is to present the reader with a constant, low-grade maternal bubbling behind the narrator's workday. Obsessed with the mother, the text nonetheless constantly flees from her, and McInerney has done such a good job obscuring her that she ultimately surprises the reader just as a ghost would. McInerney locates each of the mother's hauntings around two types of red herring--both some tangible object and some woman. Since the narrator sexualizes every female he has a relationship with, the women that

McInerney wants to matter as mother substitutes are at first unrecognizable. Of the four significant women that the narrator's adventures are structured around--Amanda (the narrator's estranged wife), Vicky Hollins (Tad's cousin), Megan Avery (a coworker), and Clara Tillinghast (the narrator's boss)--McInerney apparently only intends for Vicky to represent the narrator's possibly positive future, but we shall see that even in this she is allowed little more than a supporting role. By novel's end, the reader realizes how each of the four women serves as replacements for the loss the narrator has yet to consider, and so as each woman is taken up and set down by the narrator, McInerney reenacts the scene which is still to come, but which creates all the scenes which follow chronologically. For this reason, Bright Lights, Big City is both a novel of club-driven 80s New York City as well as a hall of maternal mirrors where the narrator unwittingly runs from and towards the image of his existence as a motherless brat.

The first of the recurring objects associated with the narrator's mother comes during his Monday morning subway commute, which reads like a spirit-crushing battle that in its humorous repetition has become so obviously unwinnable as to be unremarkable. McInerney describes routine New York City fare, such as a 50-minute commute on a graffiti-covered train, an old lady crushed in her seat by a begging veteran, and barkers for Times Square striptease shows. For the narrator, this is all absorbed without any more comment than to think about the routineness of the hucksters' spiel and the too-bright Monday morning sun. Then, at an intersection, he sees

among the announcements of ancient upcoming events strangling the lamppost like kudzu, a fresh poster with the headline MISSING PERSON. The photograph shows a smiling, toothy girl, circa Junior Prom. You read: *Mary O'Brien McCann* Your heart sinks. You think of those left behind, the

dazed loved ones who have hand-lettered this sign and taped it here, who will probably never know what happened. The light has changed. (Bright 13-14)

The intense response the narrator has to this poster is arresting--we have just seen him make his bored way to work, ignoring his loopy surroundings, which, wild as they may be to non-natives, are by now numbingly familiar to him. Why he is snapped out of his wearied routine by the MISSING PERSON poster at first seems to suggest some clue to the narrator's character, who thus far tends to think of himself not as a person, but as a "kind of" person; for example, "you are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning" (Bright 1). It would thus be easy to read the narrator himself as the "kind of guy" who is a Missing Person, stopping at a poster for himself in a self-pitying and self-consciously adolescent way. Soon though, McInerney reveals that the narrator has been abandoned by his wife Amanda, and the careful reader retroactively reads the missing wife as the Missing Person. The novel now seems more clearly pointed towards examining the loss of yuppie love, and the first-time reader may be fooled into expecting the narrator's eventual redemption; perhaps the light will change for him, and he will be able to "know what happened" to his own wife? However, the initials of the Missing Person, Mary O'Brien McCann, push us in yet a third direction. Although the narrator's own M.O.M. will not appear for some time, the reader already sees here, in the language of the ubiquitous missing person poster, the kind of mourning that the narrator has yet to make for his dead mother. Since the narrator does not decode the acronym, the reader does not yet sense that the narrator is also one of "the dazed loved ones" who may "probably never know what happened." This is a recurring pattern; the narrator is much sharper when reading others' lives than he is when trying to read his own. Despite the efforts of the second-person voice to sway the reader's attention, the careful reader will

by novel's end also be able to see the manner in which the narrator's mother's death is, for him, a paradoxically "ancient upcoming event." Others may have already gone to the event, but if it has not happened to the narrator, it cannot yet count.

As proof of this, the Mary O'Brien McCann poster will return a number of times throughout the novel, each time accompanied by the same vague sense of recognition. McInerney tends to play his hand strongly; at one point the narrator takes a walk after getting drunk on his lunch break: "You are standing at the corner of Walk and Don't Walk--staring at Mary O'Brien McCann, the Missing Person poster girl--when somebody taps you on the shoulder" (Bright 66). Much hay has been made of this line; in particular critics focus on the cleverly observed "corner of Walk and Don't Walk." As a look into the narrator's soul, this detail offers us a quick read of the yuppie brat's valueless indecision. However, what truly transfixes the narrator is not the crossing sign, but the associations that the M.O.M. poster raises. The narrator is not stuck at this metaphoric corner because he does not know which direction to turn; he is stuck here because the problem of motion is so much more fundamentally voided by a missing M.O.M.

Later, the narrator sees "in a stationery store, DON'T FORGET MOTHER'S day," the lowercase "day" changing the meaning of the advertisement (Bright 86). Shortly after, "You wait fifteen minutes on the downtown platform. Everywhere you look you see the Missing Person" (Bright 86). Through the images on these two posters, McInerney begins more explicitly to connect the Missing Person with missing mothers (specifically, the narrator's, although she has not yet been introduced). This theme becomes intensified when the narrator's exasperated brother Michael shows up in town looking for his recalcitrant sibling, who will not return his phone calls. When the narrator

first catches sight of his brother, he bolts: “On Madison you pass a construction site, walled in by acres of plywood on which the faces of various rock stars and Mary O’Brien McCann are plastered” (Bright 150). Again the metaphor is clear: the construction site of the narrator’s psyche is plastered over and covered up by seemingly unrelated surfaces, which ultimately reveal themselves as being integral to the reordering of his life. To the narrator, the soul is a type of space separate from what covers it. Earlier, the narrator remarks that his “soul is as disheveled as your apartment” (Bright 32). Finally, during his deathbed reminiscences, he recalls that “after the funeral it seemed as if you were wandering around your own interior looking for signs of life, finding nothing but empty rooms and white walls” (Bright 162). That the M.O.M. poster appears so frequently in the text is part of the papering over of the surfaces of the narrator’s New York life. The narrator continues his flight: “You keep walking, thinking briefly about the Missing Person, the one who’s come and gone for good” (Bright 150). No longer an “ancient upcoming event,” the narrator finally seems closer to grasping the Missing Person for what she is, “the one” mother who is irreplaceable in life and death.

To cement the dawning of the M.O.M. poster’s significance for the narrator, the poster appears one final time. After being punched out by his brother, and just before his deathbed flashback, the narrator and his brother take a walk. They notice that “at Sheridan Square a ragged figure is tearing posters off the utility poles. He claws at the paper with his fingernails and then stomps it under his feet. ‘What is he, political?’ Michael says. ‘No, just angry’” (Bright 160). The ragged and angry figure, an id-like stand-in for the narrator, reacts to the posters, including perhaps one of the omnipresent M.O.M., in a decidedly more direct fashion than the narrator has up to now. Finally undoing his pattern of understanding others’ motivations while misunderstanding his

own, the narrator's reading of the ragged figure--he's just angry--suggests that the narrator also will be able to go through the grieving process, making the shift from "dazed love one" to angry "ragged figure" and on to proper mourning.

While Michael's heavily signaled arrival on the narrator's stoop is the immediate catalyst for the narrator's reckoning with his past, the more gradual cause is the narrator's first, wonderfully unsuccessful, mother-surrogate Amanda. The narrator only finally connects the M.O.M. poster with his own mother after running into Amanda and her new "Dial-a-Hunk" Odysseus at a party. After collapsing in outrage, he telephones Vicky (Tad's cousin), and finally confesses to her (and to himself) that his mother died "'a year ago.' The Missing Person" (Bright 178). Here McInerney explicitly connects Mom and the Missing Person, but by making Amanda the immediate cause of this revelation, McInerney plays once more with this red herring. Further confusing matters is the narrator's conversation with Vicky: "'I tried to block her out of my mind. But I think I owe it to her to remember.' 'Wait. *Who?*' 'My mother. Forget my wife. I'm talking about my mother'" (Bright 179). While the reader ultimately discovers that the Missing Person is truly Mom, here the reader is as confused by all the "hers" as Vicky is. "Forget my wife. I'm talking about my mother" is both the narrator and McInerney's command, but it is one that is hard to follow.

Bringing Amanda back so late in the novel is further confusing for the reader who had initially marked her as a candidate for the Missing Person. The first time the text shows Amanda's body, she is in Saks: "inside the window is a mannequin which is a replica of Amanda" (Bright 68). The postmodern *unheimlich* of this scene is belied by the narrator's friend "Tad's first reaction, when you told him about Amanda's departure, [which] contained a grain of genuine sympathy and regret" (Bright 43). True to his

cynical nature, Tad immediately begins to scheme about how to capitalize on the situation, since he knows Amanda is not missing so much as she is simply absent; Amanda is not a missing person to be found, she is just as her mannequin is: an absent, superficial figure. The surface of Amanda's body is everywhere in Bright Lights, Big City, since she has literally left pieces of herself everywhere: "the place is haunted. Just this morning you found a makeup brush behind the toilet" (Bright 37). There is also mail, messages from friends, and more horrifying, Tad's remark that "ninety percent of your average household dust is composed of human epidermal matter" (Bright 43). To the narrator, "this explains your sense of Amanda's omnipresence. She has left her skin behind" (Bright 43). Clearly their relationship was a "skinny" one, thin and insubstantial during their time together, and resulting only in so much excess surface material. A fragmented Amanda is exactly what über-Yuppie Tad expects. For him "Amanda's departure was not surprising but inevitable. It confirmed his world view" that living with the pieces Amanda left of herself is not that much different from living with a whole Amanda (Bright 116).

On the other hand, the narrator's brother Michael's reaction is more perceptive. After hearing that Amanda has left, Michael (and McInerney) prompts the narrator by asking "do you think you'd have married her if Mom hadn't been sick?" (Bright 161). Put in these refreshingly blunt terms, it turns out that the relationship between Amanda and Mom is quite simple to parse: "your first love had given notice of departure and Amanda's application was on file" (Bright 161). Speaking of the beginning of his marriage, the narrator uses the language of Wall Street--departure notices and applications--to bridge the connection between loving Amanda and loving Mom. This language turns to natal metaphors: "You kept waiting for the onset of grief [over the

mother's death]. You are beginning to suspect it arrived nine months later, disguised as your response to Amanda's departure" (Bright 162). Grasping for a way to describe the chain of events and the reasons behind them, the narrator is even now only gradually becoming suspicious of his earlier actions. The obviousness of these suspicions (to Tad, to the reader) escapes the narrator since he has "made such a point of not dwelling on the incidents associated with your mother's death, almost denying that it was a consideration at all" (Bright 161). But, like the pieces of herself that Amanda has left behind, the residue of the narrator's mother's death continually resurfaces.

Beyond her functions as a red herring mother-surrogate, what Amanda really does for Bright Lights, Big City is to generate an urban-rural dualism, demonstrating the evil seduction of the motherless big city. Presented as a hick Kansan desperate to get to Gotham, Amanda embodies for the narrator "some kind of truth and American virtue" present in the heartland (Bright 69). It soon becomes obvious to everyone else that Amanda is merely using the narrator to escape; he is her "ticket out of Trailer Park Land. Bright lights, big city" (Bright 116). Of course, one problem is that the narrator is doing the same thing. Trying to hide his own middle-class, apple-pie morality, he worries that in New York City "where skin-deep is the mode, your traditional domestic values are not going to take root and flourish" (Bright 116). The traditionality of the "domestic" and domesticated lifestyle is at odds with the poisonous environment of Seventh Avenue and fashion modeling. We see the narrator suckered into believing not only that Amanda can represent "some kind of truth" but also into believing that there is "some kind of truth" in the first place. The narrator is as obviously misguided about the heartland as Amanda is about the city.

Adding to this confusion is the narrator's increasing awareness of the falsity of the

dualism between the urban and rural. Although continually reinscribed by the surface of the city, the basis of this dualism turns out to be unfounded, and by novel's end this discovery is key to the narrator's new sense of self-awareness. McInerney consciously plays with this dichotomy by repeatedly invoking a prime symbol of the heartland--wheat. Wheat and bread are mentioned regularly, most often in the context of the first two women in the narrator's life: his wife and his mother. Amanda's "hair was the color of wheat, or so you imagined" (Bright 69). Since the narrator has yet to actually ever see any wheat, he is unreliable on this score, his thoughts dominated by nationalistic fantasy: "you pictured her backlit by a sunset, knee-deep in amber waves of grain" (Bright 69). When the new couple moved from Kansas to New York City, "every morning you woke to the smell of bread from the bakery downstairs" (Bright 9). With this, the idyll of the heartland becomes the idyll of the city, connected by the smell of fresh bread. This idea becomes repetitive when McInerney later returns us to the corner of Bleecker and Cornelia. The narrator is going to cook dinner with another love interest, Megan: "'Best bread in the city,' Megan says, pointing to Zito's Bakery. . . . The fragrance of the interior reminds you of mornings on Cornelia when you woke to the smell of bread from the bakery ovens, Amanda sleeping beside you" (Bright 134). Associating bread-making with the domestic woman is a hoary trope McInerney is not above invoking, but since he is also still keeping the mother hidden, it is not until the last chapter that the author offers the most significant associations.

In the final three redemptive pages, the narrator leaves Amanda's party at dawn on Sunday, walking home with a bleeding nose. Smelling bread from a bakery, he cadges some, choking on it after not having eaten for two days. Even here, the rural-urban dichotomy still holds for the narrator, who gives his Ray-Bans to the man for bread,

fantasizing that this is “a man with a family somewhere outside the city” (Bright 182). Rather than work through the earlier stereotyped associations of the rural, feminine domestic with bread-making, McInerney here simply gives those tropes over to the men: after the mother’s death and the wife’s abandonment, it is the men who will make and trade bread. The novel, then, ends even more ambiguously; while the narrator is ready to face his mother’s death and a world characterized by her absence, he seems to envision in response a world without any women at all. Choking on the bread, he realizes “You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (Bright 182). This final, choking communion of self-discovery turns out to be only the beginning; the novel’s end offers us the narrator’s dawn rebirth, but not any redemption for the failure to grieve for his mother.

The novel’s end takes the smell of baking bread, first associated with Amanda, and perversely reworks it as a maternal theme. Leaving the party, the smell recalls to the narrator a surprise visit home from college. Mom was baking bread, for

she said she had to find some way to keep herself busy now that her sons were taking off. . . . You sat down at the kitchen table to talk, and the bread soon started to burn. She had made bread only two other times that you could recall. Both times it had burned. You remember being proud of your mother then for never having submitted to the tyranny of the kitchen, for having other things on her mind. She cut you two thick slices of bread anyway. They were charred on the outside but warm and moist inside. (Bright 181)

The surprising image of the unsuccessful baker raises a problem for the reader, who would expect a traditionally domestic childhood memory. But this is a brat’s childhood memory, and the reader must consider the mother’s own 60s upbringing and possibly

rebellious youth. By reversing the trope of the feminine bread-giver, McInerney leaves us wondering how to read this scene. We could see this as an authorial refutation of the narrator's sexist attitudes, seeing now that he was not raised with the misapprehension that all women are good cooks (or, that all that women are good at is cooking).

McInerney's narrator, while himself uninterested in the act of eating,⁶³ has however been repeatedly noting the associations food items raise. Or, McInerney could be picking on the mother; not expecting company, she picks up a traditional hobby only to botch it.

Read alongside a larger pattern of exclusively blaming mothers for their sons' (mis)development, the mother's burnt bread provides a shallow cause for the narrator's later stupidities. The son's fantasy--"you are the kind of guy who . . ."--is damaged by not having "the kind of mother who . . ." bakes bread. Instead, his is the kind of mother who gets cancer and dies. If the mother had been a good cook, then perhaps she could have adequately prepared a young man for entering the world of bright lights, big city. Or, perhaps McInerney's 80s updating of the fictional, nostalgic, maternal tradition--aproned mother ritually preparing daily bread--tries to see her as properly "liberated." The narrator finds a source of pride in the fact that Mom cannot cook because she has "other things on her mind"; by refusing "the tyranny of the kitchen," by not being "the type of mother who . . .," she becomes admirable to the progressive son.

It is a stretch to read McInerney as rewriting the mother as a liberated woman; being a poor cook is not shorthand for being a good feminist, although she does resist the siren call of the kitchen in a household with four males. Additionally, McInerney demonstrates his masculinist bent by giving her four sons, two of them twins, by not giving her a name, and most of all by martyring her on the altar of the son's manhood.

⁶³ Literally because of the cocaine user's suppressed appetite, figuratively because of the narrator's enforced emptiness.

Oedipal interpretations aside,⁶⁴ the death of the mother is a cruel scene, and the later revelation that she also cannot manage to keep an eye on the oven does not do anything to mitigate McInerney's confused sense of what the mother means to the narrator, or, more importantly, of what the mother can mean to the narrator. This confusion is par for the course for the narrator, who only at novel's end accepts that he must come to terms with his mother's death; whether McInerney is also confused or undecided about this relationship, or if he merely desires to be cryptic, is harder to discern.

Continuing the pattern of signaling mother-surrogacy through food, the mother's culinary incompetence recalls an earlier scene where McInerney develops the second of the narrator's mother-surrogates. In the ninth chapter, "Linguine and Sympathy," the narrator finally makes good on a date with Megan Avery, a colleague in the Department of Factual Verification. Megan, whose initials are also suggestive, has thus far been mostly forgotten by the narrator. She has asked him to bring her a Tab, a bagel, and for a lunch date (Bright 27, 63, 107). Each time the narrator has returned empty-handed and apologetic. Megan, incredibly understanding, suggests that "you've had a lot on your mind lately" (Bright 129). While this is true to an extent, the real reason the narrator ignores Megan is clear from the way he initially describes her:

She's older and wiser. You're not sure how old; she doesn't seem to have a particular age. You would describe her as striking, or attractive, but she has such an earnest, practical nature that it is hard for you to envision her as a sexual being. Although married once, she seems the West Village type meant to run her own life and help her friends through their many disasters. You admire her. You don't know many sensible people. Maybe you could have lunch sometime. (Bright 23-4)

⁶⁴ See, for example, Caveney and Young's reading in Shopping in Space (53).

In short, Megan clearly ranks quite low in the narrator's estimation--one of the West Village types who is good at giving advice, who is mostly selfless, mostly sexless, mostly available (both for the purposes of the narrator and the narration) *just in case*. She is "the kind of gal who . . .," bland and available, exists for others, and McInerney uses her as much as the narrator does. Introduced and ignored, it is not until the narrator is fired, and slightly bored, that Megan is finally explored as a character. Furthermore, McInerney makes it clear that the narrator is slumming it by hanging out with Megan; cleaning out his desk, the narrator finds cocaine and offers it to her, thinking derogatorily to himself "for her it might be a treat, something out of the ordinary" (Bright 131).

The two decide to have dinner. When Megan suggests that they cook, the narrator responds "suspiciously" to this "radical idea" (Bright 133). They buy linguine and canned clams. Since Megan's apartment is near the narrator's first apartment with Amanda, memories of his estranged wife consume his thoughts (Bright 133). As he did with Amanda, the narrator is at first over-reliant on his initial interpretation of Megan. In her apartment, though, he begins to discover things he has never bothered learning before: that she has two cats, that she originally wanted to be an actress, that "she has a terrific ass" ("You have worked with her for almost two years without noticing her ass") (Bright 136), and, most shocking, that she has a thirteen-year-old son (Bright 137). It is with this last maternal revelation that "suddenly Megan seems much less scrutable than you had imagined" (Bright 138). The narrator, focused on the sexual possibilities of "a man and a woman alone in a room with a bed" (Bright 137), had asked of a picture if it was not one of Megan's old boyfriends. The narrator is surprised when she replies that it is her son, and the reader is even more surprised that the narrator should see a picture of an 11-year-

old and immediately think “boyfriend.”⁶⁵ The narrator, trying to get a handle on Megan and her inscrutability, finds himself caught between the only two ways he knows of relating to women--as a son or as a lover.

Adding to the narrator’s confusion, Megan’s story is rather dramatic, and her version of the drugs-in-the-80s narrative is much harsher than any of the narrator’s nightclub bathroom escapades or jokey references to “Bolivian Marching Powder.” Megan’s husband had her committed and took custody of her son, taking him to Michigan⁶⁶ while she was “in Bellevue stupefied with Librium” (Bright 138). She does not begrudge her husband, though; she tells the narrator, “I was raving. Manic depression. They finally figured out a few years ago it was a simple chemical deficiency. Something called lithium carbonate. Now I take four tablets a day and I’m fine. But it’s a little late to become a full-time mother again” (Bright 138). Megan is oddly resigned to her dis-mother-ment, and McInerney gives us here another missing mother to another missing son. Having his character say “it’s too late to become a full-time mother” makes a point not only about the proper time at which one can be (and at which one needs) a mother, but also makes a distinction between different type of mothers. Still near the language of Wall Street, Megan is now a “part-time” mother (she sees her son once a year), a role significantly less valued than “full-time” mother. Being a “part-time mother” is always second-best, is always the fault of the mother, is always a ready punishment for transgressions, and is a dead-end job without upward mobility.

Megan’s conception of mothers is much different than the narrator’s, who will

always be a son to his mother. Paul Rudnick adds a third possible mother to these two,

⁶⁵ There is a numerical explanation as well. The narrator is now 24 years old (Bright 65), making him 11 when Megan’s 13-year-old son was born. The picture was “taken a couple of years ago” (Bright 137), when the boy was about 11. So, the narrator sees himself in the photograph of Megan’s 11-year-old son--potentially both 11-year-old son and 24-year-old boyfriend.

⁶⁶ Another reference to the rural/urban dualism; Megan and her husband argued over where to raise their son (Bright 138).

suggesting that there are “Mothers,” there are “Moms,” and, new to the 80s, there are “Mommies.” Associating Mothers with authors like Cheever and Updike, Moms with Roth and Albee, and Mommies with “today’s fictioneers, the bookboomers,” Rudnick makes his distinction clear by comparing the way these maternal figures end life: “When Mother died, people whispered . . . in their Sunday best. When Mom died, our parents raced for the shrink, in hairshirts. When a Mommy dies, the betrayal is enormous, and kids turn to cocaine, or Rum Raisin, or TV” (“Missing” 54). The narrator’s mother’s death, still secret, is in Rudnick’s terms the death of a Mommy. But Megan, a part-timer from the beginning, does not fit well into this category. Her raving, chemically-imbalanced behavior, drugged into submission, has already caused her to be replaced by “a wonderful stepmother” (Bright 138), and as such she operates in the novel as the forfeiture of motherhood--a paradox to the narrator who is unable to imagine a mother no longer being a mother, or a mother who is not really at heart a mommy.

Megan’s acquiescence to her botched motherhood is covered by the maternal tropes McInerney associates with her. The raging, uncontrollable mother is as familiar a theme as the homemaking, aproned one, and Megan combines the two. Very skilled in the kitchen, she has decided to teach the narrator “how to purchase and make a meal” (Bright 133) although he is able to do little of the work: “You mostly stand and watch as Meg flashes around the kitchen” (Bright 139). Megan knows things like the difference between fresh and dried pasta (Bright 133), that wheat bread is better than white (and which bakery has the best) (Bright 135, 134), how to pick produce (Bright 135), and how to peel garlic (Bright 139). The “foodness” surrounding Megan, her skill as a cook, counters the narrator’s mother’s culinary cluelessness, and amazes the narrator. Comparing the two women’s relative skills, McInerney simultaneously suggests that ironically one

cannot have a son and be a cook, and also that being a good cook is good cover for being a bad mother. While Amanda's hair only resembled foodstuffs, the narrator's mom at least tried to bake. In contrast, Megan is coded as a "good cook," but this is only a mask when juxtaposed with her second-best mothering. Not only can the narrator only relate to women as either lovers or mothers, but each woman is also easily consumed by culinary terms. The most telling example is the last-chance girl the narrator encounters at a club in the first chapter. He eyes her outfit and quickly summarizes: "the sexual equivalent of fast food" (Bright 6). As an indication of the superficial way the narrator thinks, this line is often cited in reviews; reading it next to the narrator's other relationships with women, it is misogynistic.

Things get weird after dinner, when a drunk and drugged narrator makes a play for Megan:

You want to disappear inside her mouth. . . . You reach a hand under her shirt.

Gently, she grips your hand and holds it there.

"No," she says. "That's not what you want." Her voice is calm and soothing.

She is not angry, just determined. When you try to advance your hand she stops it.

"Not that," she says. When you try to kiss her again she holds you off, but she remains on the couch. You feel like water seeking its own level, and Megan is the sea. You put your head in her lap. She strokes your hair. "Calm down," she says. "Calm Down." (Bright 143)

Megan, as the sea, represents yet again nothing more than an overused literary metaphor for the narrator, something to disappear inside of.⁶⁷ As the flip side of "some kind of

⁶⁷ Consider also Ellis's novel Less Than Zero, whose billboard slogan "Disappear Here" invites a different kind of return.

truth” (Bright 69) that he sought in the heartland, Megan acts as a stabilizing body, something upon which the man can safely rest. The confusion McInerney provides for the narrator--is Megan a mother or a lover--disrupts any meaningfulness that this scene is meant to convey. Either we read Megan as the raving female body, repressible through drugs but otherwise frantically out of control, or we read Megan as the calming, docile sea. That she has been tamed and subdued by her initial failure at being a mother makes her attractive to the narrator. Offering the narrator a reading of his (and our) confusion, she says of her breast “that’s not what you want.” In many ways, she is wrong. While McInerney still has yet to reveal the mother’s death, it is becoming clear that the maternal breast, with its nourishing occlusion of the sexual aspects of the mother’s body, is as close to “what the narrator wants” as one can get.

Megan drops immediately from the narrative; this is the last we will hear of her. Whether she is lover or mother is a minor mystery, resolved when, at night’s end, the narrator urinates in his pants, leaving M.A. to clean him up and tuck him into bed. Clearly, Megan disappears here because she is *not* going to be a lover. On one hand, Megan is the most successful mother-surrogate that the narrator finds because she is such a bundle of contradictions. On the other hand, Megan, like the narrator’s mother, is an assumption, and in this they are identical. To the son they are both taken for granted: perpetually present, selfless and undefined, and unproblematically simple--until they become unavailable. Perversely, forgetting is a sign of affection in McInerney’s novel; all those Tabs and bagels the narrator forgot, all the repressed moments with his mother--these are what matter to the narrator.

There is yet another maternal association to food, this time more grotesque. Earlier, on his lunch break, the narrator went to a deli for a sandwich (forgetting Megan’s

Tab). At the deli, “the bald man behind the counter whistles cheerfully as he slices the meat. ‘Nice and lean today,’ he says. ‘And now for a little mustard--just how your mom used to make it’” (Bright 27). This comment enrages the narrator: “‘What do you know about it,’ you ask. ‘Just passing the time, pal,’ he says, wrapping it all up. All of this, the dead meat on ice behind glass, everything, puts you off your meal” (Bright 27). The cheerful deli guy manages to “wrap it all up” by an apology of sorts, but both reader and narrator are left put off by the deli man’s innocent remark, and especially by the narrator’s overreaction. What is confusing here is whether the narrator is simply wounded by memory, or if he is not more bothered by the deli man’s insinuation that he might know something about the narrator’s childhood. The deli man’s remark relies on an understanding that he and the narrator are bound by a certain shared experience, whether it be the experience of ordering pastrami-on-rye and egg creams, or the experience of having mothers make sandwiches for them. There are also class issues here; McInerney’s deli man fits a classic mold--bald, cheerful, chatty, whistling--that irks the narrator as much for its stereotypicality as for its familiarity. The deli guy reminds the self-made yuppie, constantly navigating between who he is and who he wants to be, that the fantasy of losing yourself in the city is easily short-circuited at every meal. In “The Short Happy Life of the American Yuppie,” Hendrik Hertzberg remarks on “a popular yuppie phrase, possibly connected with the well-known yuppie preference for grilled fish and crunchy vegetables”--“dead meat” (101).⁶⁸ Hertzberg cites “dead meat” as a colloquial threat to an employee or competitor. Here, the mother’s “dead meat” which puts off the narrator is also connected to the next chapter, where the narrator will get himself fired. In this, McInerney very subtly connects the narrator’s downfall--he is

⁶⁸ Interestingly, another vegetarian-friendly way of saying this-- “you’re toast” --was popularized by the 1985 film *Ghostbusters* (used in a 1983 draft). The proleptic slang “to be dead meat” has been around since 1849.

soon to be “dead meat” at work--with his mother’s death--her corpse is, morbidly, merely “dead meat” now.⁶⁹

It has been suggested that this scene indicates the manner in which the narrator relates to his mother primarily through media, since the deli man’s comment reiterates a mustard advertisement (Stubblefield 93). The text is filled with such instances of media forcefully reminding our narrator of his mother. For example, after being fired, the narrator stops to listen to a sidewalk guitarist playing blues. The songs he plays comically upset the narrator: “Ain’t Got No Home,” “Baby Please Don’t Go,” and “Long Distance Call.” “You turn away when he starts into ‘Motherless Children’” (Bright 107). Urban culture screams themes of abandonment, loss, and rejection; the narrator’s flight from them is foolish at best. Like the M.O.M. poster, the recurring smell of bread, and the pieces of Amanda, we see here a certain type of memory in objects, a form of memory which is appropriate to a superficial society.

More explicitly so is the way in which the narrator’s situation is transposed onto the headlines of the tabloid daily New York Post,⁷⁰ which takes pride of place as “the most shameful of your several addictions” (Bright 11) because it “confirms your sense of impending disaster” (Bright 57). The Post is contrasted to the “New York Times, the newspaper of record and of choice” (Bright 58) at the narrator’s workplace. But his story is not one of “Killer Bees, Hero Cops, Sex Fiends . . . Tough Tots, Sicko Creeps, Living Nightmares, [or] Life on Other Planets”; although some of these elements are certainly present, it is the “Coma Baby” that speaks most to him.

The Coma Baby is the most significant and obvious metaphor concerning the narrator’s mother’s death. The Coma Baby, who is the fetus of a woman lying in a coma

⁶⁹ We are later recalled to this scene when Megan and the narrator go into a delicatessen and then walk past “Ottomanelli’s Meats, where the corpses of small animals hang in the window” (Bright 134).

⁷⁰ The paper, purchased by Rupert Murdoch in 1976, became trashier under his ownership.

after a car crash, is introduced two pages before the M.O.M. poster. As a figure of the narrator, the Coma Baby's regular appearance in the Post and the novel offers a running commentary on the narrator's fragile relationship to his rebirth. On his morning commute, the narrator reads the second page item: "COMA BABY SIS PLEADS: SAVE MY LITTLE BROTHER. There is a picture of a four- or five-year-old girl with a dazed expression" (Bright 11). The sister provides a direct link between Coma Baby, the narrator, and the M.O.M. poster when the "dazed expression" on her face is echoed two pages later in the narrator's imagination of "those left behind, the dazed loved ones who have hand-lettered" the M.O.M sign.

True to character, the narrator is generally out of it enough that he is unable to see the significance of Coma Baby to his own life--even when he has a rather opaque anxiety dream about the Coma Baby, his boss, and his failure to verify a piece on French elections. His dream opens the fourth chapter, "A Womb With a View." Sneaking into a hospital, the operating room turns out to be the narrator's office; his coworkers are speaking French and doing drugs.

The Coma Mom is stretched out on your desk in a white gown. IV bottles are hanging around the bookshelves, tubes plugged into her arms. The gown is open around her midsection. You approach and discover that her belly is a transparent bubble. Inside you can see the Coma Baby. He opens his eyes and looks at you. (Bright 54)

For the narrator, this is frightful stuff, which becomes scarier when the reader connects the Coma Baby's bratty and selfish attitude towards Coma Mom with the narrator's attitude towards his own varying mother-surrogates.

The narrator has been cultivating the unfortunate habit of looking through

people,⁷¹ and in his dream this practice is literalized. Although the “Womb With a View” ostensibly refers to the Coma Baby’s view outwards, more troubling is others’ view in. For example, the Post calls it “Coma Baby,” as if it were already born, instead of, say, “Coma Fetus.” Rather than critique this side of the womb with a view and examine how Coma Mom’s magically transparent belly is a particularly bratty way of thinking about birth and the special importance of children (mothers are as depersonalized as hospital incubators), McInerney writes a scene that is ignorant of its anti-maternal setting, and reduces the mother to a mere vessel (it is her womb, but it is the child’s view). Looking through the window of the comatose mother’s womb, the narrator sees himself alive and kicking. McInerney’s description also calls to mind the antiabortion movement’s tactic of focusing exclusively on the fetus at the expense of the mother. The “transparent bubble” which is the Coma Mom’s belly is an extremely frightening fantasy with associations that continue outside of the dream; while Coma Baby is of much interest to Bright Lights, Big City, Coma Mom is of little. This may be because, for the narrator, mothers are already dead by novel’s beginning. As far as the narrator is concerned, then, the Coma Mom only offers a second chance to deal with his mother’s death. Slow, spectacular, mediated, succinct--in the Post headlines the narrator is able to find the preparation for mourning that he was unable to find in real life. Prepared by a dramatized death, when the narrator reads of the Coma Mom’s death, it is hardly worth mentioning, since the Coma Baby survives.

The narrator learns of Coma Mom’s death the morning after his night with Megan. The effect of that juxtaposition of mothers and lovers is to once again do away with the mother in service of the son. This is emphasized even more keenly when the narrator in

⁷¹ Perhaps taking a cue from Tad’s cousin’s girlfriend, “you knew she was the real thing when she steadfastly refused to acknowledge your presence” (Bright 3).

his dream speaks past Coma Mom's body to the Coma Baby, who is more irked than anything at the interruption:

“What do you want?” he says.

“Are you going to come out,” you ask.

“No way, José. I like it in here. Everything I need is pumped in.”

“But Mom's on her way out.”

“If the old lady goes, I'm going with her.” The Coma Baby sticks his purple thumb in his mouth. You try to reason with him, but he does a deaf-and-dumb routine. “Come out,” you say. Then there is a knock on the door, and you hear Clara Tillinghast's voice: “Open up. It's the doctor.”

“They'll never take me alive,” the Baby says.

The phone is ringing. The receiver squirts out of your hand like a trout.⁷² (Bright 54-55)

In his dream, the Coma Baby represents the male product of the 80s, and is therefore freighted with conflicting interpretations: Coma Baby is the narrator, is the type of person that the narrator wants to be, is the type of son that the narrator does not want to be, is the kind of kid that America is afraid of raising. The Coma Baby is a fantastical screen for projected anxieties and dreams; what it means (to the narrator, to the reader, to the author) depends so much upon what else is happening in the narrative. What Coma Mom offers is a new nightmare for the Me Generation--someone talking to you not from the grave, but from a “womb with a view.” The Coma Baby, buried alive before he is

⁷² The simile of the phone squirting “out of your hand like a trout” is at first bizarre, although it fits into a larger pattern of fish and fishing references, for example the narrator taking note of the “WISE MEN FISH HERE” sign outside of Gotham Book Mart (Bright 68) or the narrator describing the sound of dropping a cocaine vial into a toilet as “an insolent splash that resembles the sound of a very large brown trout spitting out the hook of a very small and painstakingly presented dry fly” (Bright 105). In addition to signifying an often difficult, time-consuming, and occasionally fruitless task, the rural, youthful image of fishing works as the narrator goes on a journey first to fully “citify” himself, and then a reverse one home to embrace the idyllic country. Another reading of fishes and loaves is possible.

born, is satisfied; from the yuppie perspective, the womb is little more than an idealized drug lab--a fetus permanently plugged in, fed, narcotized. For the Coma Baby, Coma Mom is little more than a source; for the reader, though, it is hard not to see yet another dying mother and yet another lonely son.

In the Coma Baby's gung-ho, cowboy western attitude, the narrator also comes to regard the idealized utopian womb as worth defending. Referring to Coma Mom as "the old lady," saying "no way, José," and rephrasing Humphrey Bogart's famous line from High Sierra (1941), "you'll never take me alive, coppers," Coma Baby demonstrate a fetal determination that at first surprises the narrator. Here, the Coma Baby's tough-guy speech points out that not even the womb is safe from the effects of popular culture, and that as a potent symbol, the womb is fair game for a continually rewritten expression of the current culture's values and anxieties. A little Bogart in the womb, the Coma Baby is already primed for a life as a brat. He claims he would rather be dead than without his fix, which suggests that, like the narrator, he could not possibly imagine a world without Mommy, and his refusal to "come out" is conflated with the situation of the surrounded criminal: a shoot-out is in the works.

The morning after this dream finds the Coma Baby "buried on page five. No developments: 'COMA BABY LIVES'" (Bright 57). McInerney later uses this headline to explicitly connect the Coma Baby to the narrator. Adding an exclamation mark, "Coma Baby Lives!" becomes the title of the sixth chapter, which concerns the narrator's date with Tad's cousin Vicky, a third possible mother-surrogate. There are no references to Coma Baby in this chapter, and so the chapter's title must refer directly to the narrator, who surprises himself by having a wonderfully restrained, drug-free date. Yet, the authorial excitement for the narrator's sake, who is finally getting it together, is marred by

the comparison to the Coma Baby. While McInerney wants us to read this chapter as a source of hope for the narrator's future, it is difficult not to see the narrator as living in the same manner as the Coma Baby is living: selfishly refusing to open up to those around him. This is exemplified by yet another of the narrator's feints about his mother, where he, channeling some of the Coma Baby's cynical machismo, misleads Vicky. During a walk in his old neighborhood, the narrator imagines Vicky's ideal past: "a vivid image of this childhood Arcadia," complete with "gazebo . . . tea parties," "chickens in the boathouse," "empty rooms to play in," and "pets galore" (Bright 94). Despite the idyllic past, the narrator is suspicious:

The irrevocable past tense of the narration suggests to you some intervening tragedy. You suspect a snake in the vegetable garden.

"Your parents?" you say.

"Divorced three years ago. Yours?"

"Happy marriage," you say.

"You're lucky."

Lucky is not the word you would have chosen, except maybe out of a hat. (Bright 95)

Here, the narrator lies by omission--both to himself and about himself. While his parents did have a happy marriage,⁷³ this is hardly the appropriate answer to the open-ended question "your parents?" especially considering that it is the narrator's hypocritical reservations about Vicky that begin this line of conversation. His lie is even worse following Vicky's honesty about divorce. The narrator's one-upmanship--my childhood was happier than yours--fits with the attitude he reveals when he thinks, "lucky is not the word you would have chosen, except maybe out of a hat." The narrator's statement

⁷³ His mother says "Your dad and I *have* been happy" (Bright 166).

cleverly confuses the meaning of luck. The narrator acts as if luck was always something smart yuppies could choose if they so desired, and that the randomness of luck is only incidental to the more determined choosing that the self-made man makes. As a yuppie strategy, getting lucky is equivalent to making oneself lucky.

The yuppie's conception of luck is also part of the novel's discussion of cancer. The narrator's mother's painful death is the most dramatic instance, but the theme of cancer plays a bit part throughout in collapsing the narrator's sense of self-control, of determined luck. At first, cancer is a bad joke on Allagash's part. Out at clubs, Tad has taken to telling girls unbelievable lies to explain Amanda's absence and to garner enough sympathy for the narrator to "make a fine erotic career" (Bright 43). For example, we hear that Amanda died in a plane crash on the day of their first anniversary (Bright 44), that she was killed in a crossfire between terrorists and French police (Bright 45), and that she was Che Guevara's illegitimate daughter, dying in prison after being tortured by South American generals (this last a story of the narrator's own invention) (Bright 50). Crossing the line, though, is when Tad says that Amanda died from leukemia. "I do not appreciate this leukemia bit," the narrator says. "Not funny" (Bright 51). To Allagash's protest that he's "just trying to boost sales," the narrator says "I'm not amused. Bad taste" (Bright 51-2). Tad's witty rejoinder to this is not only in accordance with his callow nature, but it also demonstrates the cynically relativistic view of the world that produces the yuppie's long view of luck. "'Taste,' says Tad, 'is a matter of taste'" (Bright 52). Tad "gives" Amanda leukemia, controlling her past as surely as he controls his own.⁷⁴

Cancer returns the next morning, shortly after the narrator's Coma Baby

⁷⁴ The other connotation of "taste," sampling drugs, recalls Kathy Acker's remark in Great Expectations (1982) that "the total nihilism of 1979 caused nothing but O.D.'s and cancer" (78).

nightmare. Entering the office, the narrator finds his colleagues looking at a copy of the New York Times: “one of the magazine’s writers . . . has just won a big award for her series on cancer research. *Cancer*. . . . You are about to nod your head and impersonate enthusiasm when you see the ad on the facing page” (Bright 58-9). The ad on the facing page features Amanda, and the narrator is shocked to learn from this that she has returned to New York from Paris. The juxtaposition is too much for the narrator; he gets dizzy: “*Leukemia, Tad said*” (Bright 59). While Amanda seems to cause him to swoon, in retrospect it turns out to be the mother’s real cancer, and not Amanda’s distasteful cancer, that is most troubling. As in the later party scene where the narrator confuses his “hers,” McInerney still refuses to play straight with the reader. While Amanda is the apparent cause of the narrator’s immediate problems, she is also entirely unimportant.

We are now left with the novel’s originary scene: the narrator’s flashback⁷⁵ to his mother’s death. McInerney intends this scene to be both grotesquely unsettling and comfortably familiar, as the mother’s near-corpse holds out for one final, tender scene. Showing up near the end, the narrator is shocked by the mother’s aspect: “you thought you would faint [at] the ravaged form. Even the smile had shifted. . . . You wanted to run away. But the horror passed” (Bright 164). Just as he did with Megan, and with most women, the narrator has taken his mother for granted; “but for those last hours you might never have really known her” (Bright 164). McInerney wants to shatter the narrator’s conception of his mother. She asks him about cocaine and about sex. “Your mother, who never smoked a cigarette in her life, who got loopy on two drinks. . . . You always thought your mother was the last Puritan” (Bright 165). After this unexpected conversation, “the wasted flesh seemed illusory,” and the narrator began to “see her somehow as young, younger than you had ever known her” (Bright 166). This new phase

⁷⁵ The second of two flashbacks; the first which recounts Amanda’s story.

in their relationship--mother as fellow 80s confidant--is attributed wistfully to her impending death: "I wish I'd known a long time ago that I was going to die" (Bright 165). The memory starts to ring false notes here; the mother's eagerness to discuss her son's sexual partners and pleasures clearly signals the kind of fantasy that we are in--the mother's unplumbed depths become a source of regret only slightly mitigated by the son's final, adult relationship with her.

The son's fantasy of his mother's curiosity is thematized by the mother's pain. McInerney has the narrator's mother suffer horribly; she can no longer sleep or swallow, and requires a morphine injection every four hours. The mother tortures herself on this pain for the narrator's sake, not taking morphine because "she wanted to talk, to be clear" (Bright 165, 167). When the conversation turns to the narrator's childhood, her pain is associated with the narrator's unruly behavior: "'You were a funny boy. An awful baby. A real screamer.' Then she grimaced and for a moment you thought it was the memory of your screaming" (Bright 167). The narrator was the worst of all the siblings, and this makes him proud. "Unbearable as an infant, always throwing up, biting, crying through the night," (Bright 168) the narrator, like the Coma Baby, is a brat from the beginning. As her own pain worsens, the mother says "it's like when you were born. It sounds crazy, but that's exactly what it's like" (Bright 168). Her dying hurts as much as her son's birthing; the two are equal in this respect. She continues, "I didn't think I'd live through it," (Bright 168) echoing what we've heard the narrator say earlier: "before it happened you couldn't believe you would survive your mother's death" (Bright 161). The unbelievable equations of pain--birth, dying, and mourning--are not only an example of trite, ashes-to-ashes symbolism, but are also simply abusive and paternalistic. As the sun comes up, his mother dies in pain, holding his hand. Her last words, "don't let go"

(Bright 169), are weepy, lachrymose, and suspicious. The suggestion that the narrator literally interprets these words, refusing to let go by not mourning his mother, further vilifies the dead mother.

The novel does not end with mother's death, but rather as it began: at sunrise on a Sunday morning. The mother's death, which was also timed to the rising sun, becomes another element in McInerney's association of mortality and this culture's morality. Bright Lights, Big City is not far from the vampire story, with its "between" (Girard), undead narrator. What is most striking is that while McInerney attributes most of the narrator's relationships to sexual desire, "the touch of flesh" (Bright 8), the author also makes each relationship a life or death situation, a play to cheat mortality: "almost any girl, specifically one with a full head of hair, would help you stave off this creeping sense of mortality" (Bright 4). Mortality, already associated with bread, is also in particular summoned by sunlight: "if you go out into the morning alone . . . the harsh, angling light will turn you to flesh and bone. Mortality will pierce you through the retina" (Bright 6). McInerney is not done yet, though, for the coked-out, club-going vampire will have to contend not only with sunlight, but with his mother's memory as well; leaving the club in the first chapter "is even worse than you expected, stepping out into the morning. The glare is like a mother's reproach. The sidewalk sparkles cruelly" (Bright 8).

The mother's imagined reproach--the sun's glare--continually reappears: "the glare from the sidewalk stuns you; you fumble in your jacket pocket for your shades" (Bright 27). These shades, traded finally to the man for bread, are the narrator's weapon against the sunlight and the increasing brightness of his mother's memory. The "bright lights" of the title refer not only to the brightly exciting neon lights of night time, but also to the brightly painful sunlight of a morning hangover. It is through these latter bright lights that

the mother suffuses the text. Dazed by the excessive brightness, the narrator is blinded to any recognition of his mother, and until he gives up his Ray-Bans to the bread man, McInerney also continually keeps the reader shaded from the significance of the mother's death on the son's burned-out existence in New York City.

It is in both of these bright lights, however, that the son's guilty imagination of the mother's reproachful glare threatens to undo the illusioned life the narrator desperately wants to lead. He is "the kind of guy who . . ." wants to lead a life where wives do not run off and where mothers do not die, or at least have the good decency to die a quick, meaningless death, preferably while in a coma, at the hands of a crazed sex killer, or in a freak accident. Something, in short, reportable and newsworthy. Shining through in the end, though, is the mortal, piercing ray of maternal ambivalence; the mother is gone, and while each of the son's problems are traceable back to her absence, they are each also caused by his own dazed guilt and fantasy over his improper, avoided mourning. McInerney dedicates his novel "FOR MY MOTHER / AND FATHER, AND FOR MERRY." Merry is McInerney's second wife; they divorced the year after Bright Lights, Big City was published. Other than this dedication, there are no fathers in the novel, and the only other named male characters work with the narrator; gay, pedantically scholastic, or dodderingly old, none of them are remotely father-like. McInerney's mother, though, takes pride of place in his dedication and at the novel's emotional core. Falling short of an apology, the guilty narrator's choking on bread does promise a return to a normal life for the sake of the mother's memory; the brat's flight to yuppiedom, which the novel's details revel in, is shown to be only so much escape from the inescapable confrontation with a mother's very un-80s death.

Chapter Three

... *Mater sed certissima* and “In the Matter of Baby ‘M’”

“‘*Pater semper incertus est,*’ while the mother is ‘*certissima.*’” (Freud, after the Latin)

“Well, who’re you going to believe? Certainly not a mother, not these days.” (Barbara Katz Rothman, “Comment on Harrison” 312)

I. Feminism and the NRTs (matter)

This chapter will consider scientific and legal techniques by which the 1980s absents the maternal in its figuration of a new type of feminine subject. Following Foucault, I mean to think of these techniques as practices that structure problematizations in a culture, and so this chapter will look at both actual scientific techniques that are new to the 80s, as well as legal, social, and cultural techniques of dealing with supposed technological novelty. First, though, a brief restaging of the feminist debate regarding science and technology,⁷⁶ as it relates to that period’s feminists’ increasingly nuanced understanding of their troubled relationship to science. To begin with, one way of putting the question of the interrelation of science and feminism is to look materially at biology, tracing a history of all forms of women’s oppression (physical, economic, social, political, legal) to unequal reproductive roles stemming from biological difference. Since reproduction,⁷⁷ presumably desired by all members of a

⁷⁶ By the former I mean generally the paternalistic implementation of the latter; no implement of technology being essentially evil or benign, but also no implementation of technology coming without a scientific agenda. I have in mind specifically critics such as Donna Haraway, Valerie Hartouni, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Vivian Sobchack.

⁷⁷ I use the word “reproduction” cautiously, noting that it is just the most recent (1782) of the following similar words: “generate” (c. 1374), “procreate” (1386), and “beget” (1205). See the Oxford English Dictionary for more, but in passing it is interesting to note that the connotations of “reproduction,” later criticized by feminists as having dehumanizing and technological overtones, were also criticized at its earliest usage; the first OED citation has Wesley complaining that Buffon “substitutes for the plain word *Generation*, a quaint word of his own, *Reproduction*, in order to level man not only with the beasts that perish, but with nettles or onions.”

species, results in unequal consequences *qua* labor, time, and investment (all three including physical, emotional, and economic vectors), one half of the reproductive pair has historically been treated unequally outside of the reproductive paradigm.⁷⁸ Additionally, as the technologically mediated use of new assisted reproductive techniques rapidly increases in America's postwar era, it in turn strongly "reinforces the already near-compulsory cultural bias toward maternity" (Farquhar, "Reproductive Technologies" 6). The result is an increasing ambivalence in late-70s and early-80s feminist discourse about America's entrenched pro-natalism, charted in Nancy J. Chodorow and Susan Contratto's "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother," which argues that authors such as Nancy Friday, Judith Arcana, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Adrienne Rich share a "belief in the all-powerful mother [which] spawns a recurrent tendency to blame the mother on the one hand, and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other" (80). In a similar context, Susan Suleiman in Risking Who One Is, points out the effect of such a single-sidedness: "it is as if, for psychoanalysis, the only self worth worrying about in the mother-child relationship were that of the child" (16). It is against this version of the all-powerful mother in the early 80s that new scientific techniques measure themselves.

When a new technique comes about which upsets or affects the traditional procreative arrangement, there can be at the least two feminist responses. On the one hand, if science and its products can help erase, or at least begin to efface, sexual difference in the reproductive roles, then women could embrace such science as a means for restoring fairness between the sexes, a radical version of this being Shulamith Firestone's early 70s example of "cybernetic communism." On the other hand, this

⁷⁸ This is true, the argument goes, for recorded history, which is in turn somewhat coincident with the development of man's idea of his role in reproduction, a role of which he was initially, in prehistory, ignorant.

erasure of biological difference, most often instigated and controlled by male scientists and legislators, can in practice become destructive of a woman's fundamental right to her own body, a right of autonomy which is imperative regardless of intention or outcome. So it becomes of more than passing concern to distinguish, in regards to science, between rights affecting an individual woman and those affecting women as a class group; while a new reproductive technology may enable a woman, say, to make money from the products of her body just as men do (fertility figured as a woman's "natural asset"), it is also easy to imagine another group of women from whom these products are coerced or taken by inducement. The compromise position attempts simultaneously to recognize and to minimize biological difference in the "granting" of bodily autonomy to women. The question, then, surrounds the economies of a woman's body--an "unnatural" technical manipulation of a natural bodily product creates a possible service in turn dependent upon the laws of supply and demand, of competition and the free market, and finally, regarding women's bodies in particular, the legislative or juridical regulation of such an economy. For feminists, it seems, the question of balancing an embrace of motherhood as something more than an "activity" (cf. Rothman) without falling into a biological determinist model is especially thorny in the Reagan 80s because, as Valerie Hartouni observes, "particularly during the 1980s, public discourse and debate have been obsessively preoccupied with women and fetuses. The 1980s began, need we remind ourselves, in a flurry of antiabortion, antigay, anti-ERA, profamily, prolife, pro-American rhetoric" (32). This flurry of attitudes is undoubtedly in response not only to feminist interrogations of the notion of the family and mothering, but also in response to the feeling, shared by feminists, that "we are now faced in the 1980s with a situation in which all aspects of reproduction have come under the command of science" (Jacobus, Keller,

Shuttleworth 3). As far as science goes, the question introduced by new techniques are under even more scrutiny by feminists as these techniques redefine woman's bodies, and especially so in the technologies surrounding infertile and fecund--motherly--bodies.

One example of earlier feminist ambivalence regarding the aims of science would be the response to the introduction of oral contraception in the 1950s. It has been shown that the history of the development of the pill is rife with questionable attitudes towards women, from the use of Puerto Rican women as guinea pigs to an apparently arbitrary standardization of women's menstrual cycles to a strict 28-day period (cf. Asbell). Nonetheless, the reproductive choice that the pill is meant to allow women is profoundly important to their fraught and contested bodily rights. The pill is perhaps the best analogy for initially framing the thought about the new or alternative reproductive technologies of the 1980s, which once again threaten to upset the traditional reproductive roles of the sexes (even some of the same panic-driven rhetoric is present--there will be an increase in female promiscuity, destruction of the family, and a lessening of the population). In the case of the later reproductive technologies, though, the pill's choice is reversed: if the pill allowed sex without reproduction, then the new reproductive techniques of the 80s allow reproduction without sex.

Like the pill, however, these new reproductive techniques turn out to be less "new" than promised. While there *are* some distinctly new scientific achievements, the majority of the "new reproductive technologies" that captured public attention in the 80s are actually just newly created ways of understanding older traditional forms. For example, surrogate motherhood, one of the important minor social issues of the 80s, is upon reflection, actually nothing new at all. As everyone who writes about surrogacy is quick to point out, surrogacy has Biblical precedents in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and

their handmaid Hagar (Genesis 16). Fictionalizing the recurrence of that tale in the near-future, Margaret Atwood's 1986 novel The Handmaid's Tale can be read as a "speculative ethnography of the present" (Balsamo 83).⁷⁹ Despite the foreignness of the Genesis tale to modern ears (those were "different times") and the disavowal of the moral lesson's utility (it is a "special exception"), it does seem to offer a precedent of sorts. Discussing the mixed fascination with the Genesis story, E. Ann Kaplan points out that the fact that surrogacy "is old and does not actually require any medical sophistication . . . may be part of its appeal" ("Politics" 117). Kaplan cites a number of surrogate narratives, each of which has strong ritualistic aspects and often a decided lack of medical sophistication, such as the one involving a turkey baster and its nod to Thanksgiving. Another critic demonstrates how the judge in an important surrogacy case "also recognizes that the common assertion that surrogacy involves new science and medical technology is nonsense. . . . The novelty in the method is legal" (Annas 1).⁸⁰ Thinking that we had found something new, an attempt was made to incorporate this newness into older forms, which only served to obscure the fact that these older forms may have been where to search in the first place. "Surrogate motherhood is more a social solution to infertility than it is a medical technology"; it is "more a reproductive arrangement than a reproductive technology" (OTA 12, 267). Or, as sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman cynically puts it, "the business of 'surrogacy' has nothing to do with scientific progress, and everything to do with marketing" (Recreating 129). After the shock of novelty wears off, and the confusion between socio-legal arrangements and scientific promise is clarified, we are forced to consider "new" forms just as we consider old forms, and thus surrogacy

⁷⁹ It and Orwell's 1984 are invoked constantly; Atwood stands out in that she was writing of her own time.

⁸⁰ In that case, "fooled by broker publicity . . . [Judge] Sorkow saw surrogacy as so modern and marvelous that it could not possibly be subsumed under any existing laws" (Annas 1). The "modern and marvelous" remains a clever juxtaposition for historicizing science; as advanced as science may become, it always retains the power of miracle.

narratives are filled with the metaphors of Pandora's box, Solomon's wisdom, Genesis's precedent, or other legal maxims, which first appear cleverly to link the past with the present, yet end up being red herrings themselves: nothing's changed except the rhetoric. Of course, Foucault would remind us, that is the point; while there may be some new techniques, and these techniques may provoke certain areas of human experience (in this case, our social experience of the maternal), ultimately what is important to examine are the ways in which the relations between individuals are mediated by, and displaced upon, these external forms. There is often not yet new language to describe or understand older arrangements; thus, the "new reproductive techniques" (NRTs) are often renamed "alternative reproductive techniques" (ARTs), diminishing their scientific strangeness in favor of an artistic utility.

If the older technology of surrogacy did become in the 80s a suddenly popular way of arranging new relationships (that is, a new "technique"),⁸¹ then it was unintentionally due to what actually was a new technology: the development of *in vitro* fertilization techniques. The idea of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) was first put forth in 1937 in an anonymous editorial in the New England Journal of Medicine, "Conception in a Watch Glass" (cf. also "breed[ing] babies in bottles" from Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover [1928]). During the 1930s, such activities as artificial insemination and the freezing of human sperm were both first successfully performed; IVF practice began more

⁸¹ Making this both a more difficult and a simpler claim is the lack of statistics regarding surrogacy before the 80s. Defined as a problem of contract law, "surrogacy" did not exist before 1976. OTA reports in 1988 that about 600 surrogate mother arrangements have been completed, and that there are about fifteen agencies in operation (13). On the one hand, surrogacy is brand-new in the 80s, on the other it is only new as a statistical issue, suggesting it was not a source of concern before this period (and thus more common?). The narrow definition of surrogacy clearly does not match with its historical presence, and opens a way for a theoretical conception of the notion of surrogacy as infecting all procreative relationships, both voluntary and involuntary.

seriously in the 1960s, despite initially being viewed of as an impossibility.⁸² IVF is the broad term encompassing medical interventions wherein fertilization, normally taking place *in vivo*, is instead performed, in the colloquial imagination, in a glass test tube. There are many such possible variations of this practice: the original genetic material can be from a couple (who can be married or unmarried), or either or both sets of genetic material can be from donors (who can be known or anonymous). Furthermore, after fertilization occurs, the embryo can be implanted into a married woman, into an unmarried woman, into a known surrogate, into an unknown surrogate,⁸³ or (speculatively) into an artificial womb (ectogenesis or extrauterine gestation). Again, the artificial insemination typically associated with surrogacy need not use any sophisticated technology, but IVF means that “for the first time in human history, babies are being born following extracorporeal fertilization” (OTA 17). So, in many ways, the new reproductive technologies of the 80s can be popularly read as a story of access to oocytes (ova, eggs); getting the inside of the woman’s body outside is specifically what is new.

There is of course a discrepancy between imaginative possibilities and scientific ones; as IVF was first introduced, it became popular before it was perfected, and those taking advantage of early IVF had a more limited set of possibilities (whether because of

⁸² At that time, “very few living human eggs had ever been seen before, the first probably being flushed from the oviducts and photographed alive by phase-contrast microscopy in 1966. . . . Yet even as a man walked on the moon, no one knew when a woman ovulated” (Edwards and Brody 2; see this work for a technical overview of the ethics of “assisted human conception”). Cf. Petchesky on the crucial importance of vision in constructing medical science. Here are some landmarks of IVF: the first IVF pregnancy, occurring in Australia in 1973 (also the year of the Uniform Parentage Act and of the *Roe v. Wade* decision), ended in early embryo death. The first successful IVF baby born was Louise Brown, in England 1978; the first IVF baby born in the United States was Elizabeth Jordan Carr, born in 1981. Economics had already entered the picture; Noel Keane arranged the first surrogate motherhood contract in 1976 (his Infertility Center of New York would later play a role in the Baby M case), and in 1987 the patenting of an embryo transfer procedure began the practice of patenting bodily products, whose varying constitutionality would need to later be sorted out by the court system. In 1988, the “first U.S. child conceived from a donated egg is born;” the donor was paid \$250. Successful *in vitro* fertilization was reported as early as 1944 (cf. Wilder 178), but Brown’s pregnancy only occurred after scores of failed attempts with other women. According to Corea, by the end of 1980 the “live birth success rate for human IVF was .04 percent,” or three out of 287 women (116). Rothman later puts it at 10 percent (*Recreating*).

⁸³ This rarely occurring in the instance of medical accident or of a women who desires a child genetically unrelated.

medical risks or public disapproval) than will later be available. These technologies dangerously “extend the possibility of a medical and scientific practice that outreaches human understanding and public control” (Stanworth 1), but as we shall see this is generally truer when the technologies in question are practiced upon a woman’s body. It is the early cases that fall within the gaps between “scientific practice” and “human understanding” that prove most compelling, for they demonstrate resolutions to what often ultimately become, practically speaking, non-issues. Yet, this resolution, most often done after the fact by the court system or state legislatures, results in decisions which continually accrete, developing a hypothetical set of practices formed around an implicit notion of women’s bodies. As an example, when embryo implantation was still considered experimentally risky, common surrogacy arrangements necessitated that one half of the genetic material be from a third party (that is, using the egg of the surrogate mother who would bear the child). As we will see in the case of “Baby M,” it was not at all clear at the time what this would mean in terms of existing law (relating to, for example, property and inheritance; the Tenth [state’s rights], Thirteenth [abolition], and Fourteenth [due process and equal protection] Amendments; patent law; parental rights; and the contracting or willing of the body or of the body’s products). Once IVF allows for extracorporeal fertilization, that one specific problem of genetic parentage could be technologically circumvented (that is, doctors would now instead recommend gestational surrogate mothers, who contribute no genetic material), although such an advance then raises a whole other host of problems (like what happens to the gestational surrogate mothers), which will next presumably become less divisive or in need of legislation once artificial wombs are perfected (and their own issues made present, etc.). To use the common metaphor, in its search for perfectibility in the human, medical science

continually opens and closes varying versions of Pandora's box. In short, the hurry to practice these techniques upon women's body forced courts, legislatures, and the public quickly to form opinions about women's bodies; many of the practical issues of these decisions were soon rendered irrelevant by later scientific technology, but the social residue of these decisions remained.

Ultimately, the best way to understand the history and development of IVF as one of the new reproductive technologies is to read the story of gamete cryopreservation. Artificial insemination with frozen sperm was successfully accomplished in 1953 (OTA 36), and had been imagined in 1866, in the case of soldiers going to battle (Wilder 178).⁸⁴ Soon, freezing sperm became a regular practice, and today sperm is commonly sold by sperm banks under FDA regulation. At first, however, the selling of human sperm was not related to artificial insemination or reproductive demand on the part of women.⁸⁵ Rather, early sperm banks had as their focus the storage of sperm for men about to undergo sterilization or who were concerned about losing fertility in a post-atomic, environmentally hazardous world. The popularity of *buying* sperm, on the other hand, only comes much later; at last by 1988, "sperm selling seems to be socially acceptable, in part because it generally does not conjure up images of selling a particular, potential human being" (OTA 228).

Contrary to the early success with freezing sperm, oocyte preservation (eggs, ova) has been more difficult and has only occurred in practice much later (cf. OTA 299). While it seems to me that this tardiness is because gender bias has prevented male scientists

⁸⁴ Consider also the implications of this upon Nancy Huston's reading, in "The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes," of the homologous and contrary relationship between mothers and heroes. A mother's son goes to war, yet first preserves his semen so that if he does not return he may still engender himself.

⁸⁵ As is common in scientific narratives, technologies are more quickly accepted in farm and agricultural industries; I will just examine here human medical practices.

from taking seriously a woman's body as an object of inquiry, Gena Corea in her influential The Mother Machine reads it differently, cynically noting that while sperm cryopreservation took some hundred years to develop, "there has been no comparable hesitancy on . . . the conception of babies in laboratory dishes" (34). There are two scientific problems associated with oocyte cryopreservation, both reflecting a scientifically constructed notion of the "fragile woman." First is that eggs are thought of as more delicate than sperm, since sperm is compact and supposedly more focused. The problems with all cryopreservation occur during freezing and thawing (not in storage), and female gametes are apparently unable to undergo this process as safely as male gametes. Second, unlike sperm donation, ova donation is medically risky; retrieving eggs to even store in the first place requires surgery, which entails additional risks and ethical concerns for women.⁸⁶ For these reasons, egg cryopreservation was not common at all during the 80s, yet ironically the same reasons against it led instead to the replacement practice of embryo cryopreservation (that is, of *in vitro* fertilized eggs). Since embryos are hardier than eggs, scientists commonly began to freeze them. Yet, since egg cryopreservation is unsuccessful, doctors must use "fresh" eggs each time they wish to create embryos to freeze. Since this requires medical risk, doctors are reluctant to surgically retrieve one egg at a time, which leads to the practice of chemically inducing ovulation and then "harvesting" many eggs per surgery. Of course, these eggs then each need to be be fertilized while they are viable ("fresh") and each of the resulting embryos frozen, leading finally to an increasing number of embryos stored in embryo banks worldwide (that is, a doctor "harvests" a dozen eggs from a superovulated woman, fertilizes all of them by IVF, and then freezes most or all of the resulting embryos for later implantation). The

⁸⁶ Again, consider the importance of viewing techniques (here, laparoscopy) in constructing these bodies (Laqueur).

status of these frozen embryos, the potential liability of storage sites, and the moral and religious challenges to define them as living beings all invest oocyte and embryo cryopreservation with more sinister overtones than sperm cryopreservation. Thus it is no surprise that, unlike with sperm banks, there are common challenges to ovum (not to mention embryo) sales, although there seemed at the time to be some Constitutional protection for this: “prohibiting women to earn money by selling their ova when men are permitted to sell sperm, may violate” the Fourteenth Amendment (OTA 225). Part of the problem is based on a gender bias in the law; state statutes historically have not used the neutral word “gamete” to describe the materials of reproduction, but have instead used “sperm” or “semen” (OTA 256). The Fourteenth Amendment protection thus seemed likely to hold, first given the presumption that medical risks associated with egg donation could be reduced, and that legal challenges associated with an embryo’s status could be resolved.

What looking at the economies (personal and public) of cryopreserving sperm and ova in the 80s makes clear is that the scientific imagination of the human exchange of gametes still operated under Aristotelian notions of the difference played by the two parts in procreation. Put otherwise, the biological difference in reproduction, historically unfavorable to women, is still unfavorable even once medical science moves reproduction outside of the womb or penis. Aristotle’s oft-cited definitions of the terms “male” and “female” are illustrative of an understanding based more on the role of the body (or Final Cause) rather than specific body parts themselves (or Material Causes). His earliest definition of “a ‘male’ animal [is] one which generates in another, [and a] ‘female’ [is] one which generates in itself” because the male has the “principle of movement and of generation” while the female has but the principle of “matter” (Aristotle 716a5).

Aristotle soon modifies this, though, when he states that the terms “male” and “female” are really only “epithets of the whole of the animal,” since an animal “is not male or female in respect of the whole of itself, but only in respect of a particular faculty and a particular part” (716a30). These particular parts, and more importantly, their particular faculties (most often associated with Material Causes--menstrual fluid and semen specifically) in turn are responsible for a potential condition of ability or inability, by which Aristotle means the ability or inability to potentially offer “movement” (in the form of semen, or concocted blood) to the potentially movable menstrual fluid, which is blood not fully concocted due to a lack of heat in females (cf. Aristotle 720a, 728a26, 765b10, 777a17). It is important to note that the ability or inability to cause the generative movement is always couched in terms of potentialities, instead of absolutes.⁸⁷

The male acts upon, activates, stimulates the female; his sperm likewise. An active form is provided and moves the female substance. Now, Aristotelian prejudices in science have been pointed out repeatedly by feminist critics,⁸⁸ but in the context of the 1980s, and its purportedly “new” reproductive technologies, we see a remarkable restaging of the ancient meaning of the materials of reproduction. For one, the kinetics of ova--their potential--require either stringent avoidance (in the case of a science which focuses on the role of sperm--who is the father?) or stringent regulation (in the case of the law which requires bodies to arise from one definable material substance--who is the mother?). And so arises a disparity in feelings about the selling of bodily materials; it does not seem likely that both parties can be considered to play an equal role, and so only one gamete

⁸⁷ Recall OTA: “sperm selling . . . does not conjure up images of selling a particular, potential human being” (228). Freezing sperm is freezing form, freezing eggs or embryos (both feminine substances) is freezing a particular.

⁸⁸ See Laqueur for an illustrative history of the topic. Consider also other Foucauldian discussions regarding the ways in which techniques of viewing what was previously unviewable allow for the constitution of new subjects. The example here is fetal monitoring techniques of the late 1960s and 70s, which in turn create an 80s debate about abortion and the new quasi-status of the fetus, which for the first time has limited legal rights (cf. Hartouni, Balsamo, Petchesky, Haraway).

type is salable, bankable, worth something. For this reason we see, concomitant with the attempted opening of the storehold of the woman's body by means of IVF, a renewed interest in the story of sperm, following a more general "social trend" of what was labeled in the 80s a "man shortage," or "infertility epidemic," or "birth dearth."⁸⁹

In 1929, the first "sperm count" was undertaken by Macomber and Sanders, finding a normal sperm density to be 100 million sperm per milliliter of semen; this would prove to be relevant in 1979, when other studies began to anxiously show decreasing sperm counts--often around 60 million sperm per milliliter, but one as low as 20 million/mL (Castleman). A 1981 New York Times piece, "Sperm Found Especially Vulnerable to Environment," juxtaposes an alarmist report (Dr. Dougherty puts the average sperm count at a damagingly low 60 million/mL) with a dismissive one (Dr. MacLeod is certain that there has not been "any serious change in potential fertility"), but who is going to take a risk (Brody C3)? Shortly after, in 1982, the Sperm Bank of California becomes the first sperm bank established for the use of single and lesbian women, a spermatic literalization of the 80s theme sounded by sociological trend spotters: that there was a dearth of available men, and hence increased competition and diminished chances for romance or marriage. The often repeated statistic, as a 1986 Newsweek article puts it, is that "forty-year-olds are more likely to be killed by a terrorist: they have a miniscule 2.6 percent probability of tying the knot" (Salholz 54). The published examples of the decreased sperm count--the loss of active potential to offer movement and form to passive matter--rewrites the medical story of mothers in the

⁸⁹ See especially the second chapter of Susan Faludi's Backlash, "Man Shortages and Barren Wombs," where the source and formation of these and other myths is demonstrated. There are so many urban legends surrounding such public crises that I am not always confident about my sources, although the veracity of the events may matter less than the fiction of their telling.

80s as not a problem of access to oocytes, but rather one of access to sperm. The “new” “social problem” of infertility compellingly figures this. The federal government’s Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) published in 1988 a fascinating report entitled Infertility: Medical and Social Choices.⁹⁰ This report sought to clarify the many misconceptions about infertility; the purported “newness” of the new reproductive technologies seems to have also suggested a “newness” to a problem of infertility, and hence retroactively to have generated increased legal, medical, and moral permissiveness.⁹¹ OTA reports that “the overall incidence of infertility remained relatively unchanged between 1965 and 1982,” which in 1982 was around 8.5 percent (4). Furthermore, “although there has been no increase in either the number of infertile couples or the overall incidence of infertility in the population, the number of office visits to physicians for infertility services rose from about 600,000 in 1968 to about 1.6 million in 1984” (OTA 5). OTA does not provide statistics on infertility in women versus men; they view infertility, regardless of the cause, as the problem of a couple, not an individual, furthermore cautioning that “it is important to note that infertility is not only a personal medical problem but also in some ways a social construct” (OTA 3). Sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman puts this social construct into some perspective, noting that a new acceptance of single parenthood and of abortion also contributed indirectly towards the social construction of infertility: “infertile couples can no longer benefit, no matter how innocently, from the tragedies of young mothers” (Recreating 231). Fewer undesired births due to contraception, abortion, or the acceptance of single parenting, coupled with the media’s excitement over IVF and other NRT success stories (for example, the rare

⁹⁰ Lamentably, OTA was closed by a Republican Congress in 1995. In response, Clinton created a National Bioethics Advisory Commission, which exists in some form today.

⁹¹ Of a landmark surrogacy case, the judge notes how a state’s interest in legislating new reproductive technologies would dramatically change dependent upon the veracity of the then available infertility statistics (Wilentz n16).

headline cases of quintuplets or quadruplets), resulted in an even keener sense that infertile couples did in fact have a new problem, which Rothman, citing a 90 percent IVF failure rate, sees as yet another social problem in itself.

The socially constructed nature of infertility is undeniable, even if it is only predicated upon psychological issues caused by one or both partners (the anxiety *of* infertility quite often being enough to cause infertility in the first place). Yet, despite the supposed diminished sperm count, and perhaps because of the increase of sperm banks, infertility will be figured in the 80s as a female problem. To demonstrate, here is an example of two normally opposing viewpoints regarding surrogacy as a “cure” for infertility: “what gives the trend [of surrogate parenting] momentum is necessity” (Gary Skoloff, qtd. in Rust 52), and “we need to have a public policy to address the very real problem of infertility, but not by allowing rich people to use poor women to bear their children for them” (Rothman, qtd. in Rust 52). So, surrogate mothering, an old “new” reproductive technology, is now caught up in a larger socially constructed problem of infertility, which is both of momentous necessity due to IVF procedures (and by implication deserving of some regulative leniency) as well as one which could create an environment of abuse if not properly regulated. It is the suggested newness of the infertility problem within a society already microscopically focused on defining, regulating, and controlling the female body that is at issue, and that makes it difficult to see that the debate is not about infertility (about children), but about fecundity (about mothers). Of the lack of agreement among feminists regarding the Baby M case, which provoked the two responses above,⁹² one critic sees how “the shock of it, initially catching feminists by surprise, in the end proved therapeutic” (Keller 25). Feminists, and

⁹² Gary Skoloff was the Stern’s lawyer in the Baby M case, and Rothman became strongly opposed to surrogacy.

lawyers, had to say something--and quick--lest they lose their place in the argument.

The new “social problem” of infertility, provoked if not directly caused by the publicity of new or alternative reproductive technologies such as surrogacy and IVF, is in turn “cured” by these same techniques. One specific practice, however, points again to the true economies at work in the NRTs. The first meaning of “surrogate” is a woman who is inseminated (most commonly artificially) by another man. She then is supposed to deliver the child and surrender it to the genetic father, whose wife adopts the child legally (of course, he need not have a wife, although this is less common). The surrogate was either paid (“commercial surrogacy”) or not (“altruistic surrogacy”). This process is, obviously, *not* new. However, with IVF, a new configuration did arise: the “gestational surrogate mother.” In the first case, the mother was genetically related to the child she surrendered--it was after all her egg that was fertilized, and so the child would carry half of her genetic material. In the case of gestational surrogate mothers, though, one woman’s egg is fertilized *in vitro*, and then implanted into a different woman; the child that this second woman gestates and bears has no genetic relationship to her. This situation was first reported in the U.S. in 1985, nine years after the first “traditional” surrogacy contract (OTA 36).⁹³

The problem gestational surrogate mothers pose is twofold. First is a legal challenge based on competing juridical, social, and scientific ways of defining of what a mother is: “models of responsibility based on male biological linkages may well be inadequate to cover the complexities of female biological linkages, which can entail a gestational relationship as well as one based on genetics” (OTA 239). This is dramatized

⁹³ A quick note on terminology: in addition to contesting the word “mother,” critics also raise problems with “surrogacy” or “surrogate” and the “donor” in “sperm donor.” As legal analyst George Annas puts it, “no one is ‘giving’ anyone anything in surrogacy: it is the sale of the mother’s interests in a child to its father” (3), and thus she is not a “surrogate mother,” but more simply a “mother.” Likewise, sperm donors only euphemistically “donate,” since they do it for commercial reasons (if it was for altruistic reasons, they would certainly be called something milder).

most clearly in the case of Anna Johnson, a black single mother who delivered a white baby not genetically related to her, and refused to surrender the child to the genetic parents.⁹⁴ Overall, OTA counts “five ‘parents’--three types of mothers (genetic, gestational, and rearing) and two types of fathers (genetic and rearing)” (OTA 213). We can add to this also two more--“legal” mothers and “legal” fathers, who need not be the same as “rearing” parents. In their efforts to decipher parental relationships, courts and legislatures have turned increasingly to the science that has provoked these problems. Genetics, according to pro-surrogacy lawyer Carmel Shalev, leads to a “masculine ethic of ‘right’ that stresses a parent’s biological tie to his or her offspring [which] should be rejected in favor of the feminine ethic of ‘responsibility’ that emphasizes a person’s intention to take care of a child” (H.W. 1179). Now, “intent” is tricky to certify, as in the case of, say, whether a woman can truly offer “informed consent” about her future, potentially pregnant state. What is interesting, though, is that in moving away from the masculine “rights of the body” (an economic right), to a feminine responsibility (surely one addressed to the children and not the parents), Shalev suggests a way to see how the *reductio ad absurdum* of the masculine ethic’s focus on genetic certainty in turn reveals new, unusual, and useful structures of kinship. For example, as Rothman points out in Recreating Motherhood, genetic linkages do not, in themselves, necessarily form parent-child relationships. Rothman gives us the percentages of various familial genetic connections, pointing out that identical twins are 100 percent related, siblings are 50 percent related, a parent and child are 50 percent related, grandparents and grandchildren are 25 percent related, as are half siblings. She concludes, “in strictly genetic terms, your sister might as well be your mother. The genetic connection is the same” (Rothman, Recreating 40). Rothman notes that the manner in which feminists “capitalize[d] on the

⁹⁴ See Hartouni’s “Breached Birth” in Cultural Conceptions (pp. 85-98).

value of ownership to gain certain rights for women” had unintentional effects as it created an “owned body,” which can in turn could create an “owned child” (Recreating 68). By moving away from a masculine, obsessive focus on the genetic rights of the body, it may be possible to find in gestational surrogate mothers a new ethic of responsibility that is still informed by the body.

The second problem is that gestational surrogate mothers render the economies of a woman’s body duplex. Instead of a gendered distinction between gamete types-- sperm/ova--extracorporeal fertilization and transcorporeal reproduction introduce a new, distinctly feminine “service”; fertility is replaced by the simpler womb as a woman’s natural asset (with the womb itself speculated to soon be technologically replaced). In legal contracts and court documents such new terms as “human incubator” and “third-party gestator” depict a woman’s function in reproduction as “a surrogate uterus and not a surrogate mother” (Lee Salk, qtd. in Harrison 301).⁹⁵ The nature of a woman’s “service” overturns the expectations made of a woman’s body,⁹⁶ apparently offering her (at least for her childbearing years) chosen entry into economic life (at least in conjunction with other reproductive technologies, like the pill). What exactly constitutes the kind of services a woman as mother provides? A mandatory “term of service”? Simply “babysitting”?⁹⁷ Rothman finds these notions becoming an actual part of the new rhetoric of motherhood: “we are in the process of redefining motherhood, of changing the meaning of that basic, essential relationship. . . . The old definitions saw motherhood as a status . . . the new language sees mothering as an activity” (“Comment” 312, 313). As “motherhood” turns into “mothering,” many looking at surrogacy are troubled by the emphasis on wombs; if gestation is seen as merely a service in the larger process of procreation, yet one divested

⁹⁵ See also Hartouni’s “Containing Women” on a dead woman delivering a healthy baby (pp. 26-50).

⁹⁶ Susan Suleiman asks, of the “woman’s body (can we say that it is always, in some sense, the mother’s body?)” (5).

⁹⁷ See Anleu (42) and Kaplan for gestational surrogate mothers labeling themselves “babysitters.”

by the body, then surrogacy and gestational surrogacy in particular appears to resemble another activity: prostitution.

On one important court decision, a critic finds that “in viewing a woman’s body as a commodity that could be bought and sold, the court equated by assumption all surrogacy with prostitution” (Anleu 39). Later legislation sought to get around this by disallowing commercial surrogacy but allowing altruistic surrogacy, at which point one is back to denying to women the aspects of biological difference which have for so long been forced upon them. One critic “argues that recognition of a special mother-child bond in reproductive law defines women as rooted in their biological capacities and impedes their economic and political progress” (H.W. 1177), and the problem is that if one disallows surrogate mothers because one does not believe that a woman has a natural right to the fruits of her labor, then one falls into “a tradition of paternalistic protectionist legislation”⁹⁸ that keeps women “out of full participation in economic life” (H.W. 1178). Anleu argues that “the distinction between commercial and altruistic surrogacy is neither self-evident nor natural but is based on powerful gender norms that pervade everyday life” and that “agreeing to become pregnant *for money* violates norms specifying that women should become pregnant *for love*” (31, 37). Altruistic surrogacy is suspicious since it is hard to believe a woman can genuinely turn herself into a “mother machine” (cf. Corea) for purely selfless reasons; however, the kind of common sense that commercial surrogacy makes is seen as incompatible with the gender norms surrounding motherhood--there are some things given that cannot be priced, but nothing’s free.

So, the case of gestational surrogate mothers makes clear the irreducible economic logic at work that pins together the centuries’ varied thinking about the raw materials of

⁹⁸ i.e., “The fact, however, that many women may not perceive surrogacy negatively but rather see it as an opportunity does not diminish its potential for devastation to other women” (Wilentz ***61).

reproduction; namely that you can't get something for nothing, and therefore your own special something becomes increasingly important in a world of competition, or illness, or disaster. Unacceptably, surrogacy contracts threaten to violate this principle by making it possible for women to become legal (rearing or genetic) mothers without having to be physical (gestational) mothers. While the 80s allows sperm donors and recognizes "surrogate fathers,"⁹⁹ surrogate mothers are only accepted with much greater difficulty. What allowed surrogate mothers in the first place was a legal fiction suggested by a supposed infertility crisis, and an appeal to the miracles of a new science extending to women further control and manipulation of their reproductive capabilities.¹⁰⁰ The new type of woman--surrogate mother--is in a tenuous position, and the apparent violation of fundamental economic laws is unacceptable, especially in the 80s. In one important case, the judge noted that "the whole purpose and effect of the surrogacy contract was to give the father the exclusive right to the child by destroying the rights of the mother" (Wilentz ***50). This is a rather brutal reconfiguration of the family dynamic; the mother is sacrificed for the sake of the child by the father, who himself is thus (if we are speaking of genetics) reborn through this act. Likewise, a critic notes "that this method of reproduction can help one family only at the expense of another[;] the 'surrogate mother' arrangement creates a family bond only by destroying a family bond" (Annas 1). This theme is common in critiques of surrogacy, as if the idea of a free ticket were so repugnant that it is necessary to remind us of the price paid.

⁹⁹ After presumptive paternity laws in response to artificial insemination, they are called simply "fathers."

¹⁰⁰ Also, it has yet to be remarked that IVF and embryo cryopreservation forestall the increasing biological imperative towards maternity prompted by menopause--and so we now have stories of 63-year-old mothers, and even of children born long after both genetic parents have died. Octavia Butler's science fiction Xenogenesis trilogy deals with these kinds of issues, as well as the issue of race. Along these lines, Marianne Hirsch points out that slave mothers are an exception to *mater certissima*, as the traffic of slave bodies makes no room for a distinction between gestational/genetic and rearing mothers (Mother/Daughter Plot 56). Patricia J. Williams, in "On Being the Object of Property," considers her need to continually write about her great-great-grandmother; Williams wants to "pin [herself] down in history" by "picking through the ruins for [her] roots" (5).

As needs to be repeatedly pointed out, sperm is not a practical analogue to ova, despite an undue scientific focus on these substance's equal genetic role. Rendering the two equivalent would apparently be a step towards rectifying sperm's heretofore privileged status (see, the ova is just as useful and important as the sperm), yet again the possibilities of ova visibility, creating conditions of apparent gamete equality, is only possible when the body is first made messy by scientific invasion, and this invasion, *qua* gametes, is really only necessary for women. Viewing the microscopically material aspects of reproduction diminishes the other, more obviously visibly material aspects--namely nine months of gestation ending in an un-analogous "parturition" (cf. Rothman, "Comment"). Dion Farquhar puts it this way:

despite the resistant hermeticism of the ovum to extraction, female gamete provision . . . enables the social effect of distributing and dispersing maternal identity and responsibility, thereby destabilizing its unicity. Perhaps this historically unprecedented monstrous fragmenting of maternity can only be allowed *if* it is shown to be the effect of disciplining and torturing a recalcitrant and chaste female body. ("Gamete Traffic" 28)

The dispersal of maternal identity is the most obvious "problem" with surrogacy, both for those in favor and for those against.¹⁰¹ The autonomy of sperm--its hardy ability to survive outside of the body (and in a woman's threatening womb), its potential to give form, its simultaneously precious and profligate nature--is both metonymy for the autonomous male body as well as simply a substance meaningless in its abundance. In a legal context, one critic considers a judge's upholding of the alienable (that is, transferrable

¹⁰¹ Although this problem was recognized, it had not been understood. Chodorow, for example, in 1978 had to begin her argument about why women mother by pointing out that "being a mother . . . is not only bearing a child--it is being a person who socializes and nurtures" (Reproduction 11).

in ownership) nature of sperm; a “man’s property in himself is foundational to liberal democracy” (Valerius 180). By comparing the relatively recent rights of a woman to hold property in herself with the “foundational” notions of a man’s body, we can see how the emphasis on sperm’s role unintentionally backfires as a strategy of reasserting gender relevancy; that sperm is alienable makes more obvious the gendered notions of bodily rights, and a body’s resulting capability for political agency. Ironically, as Farquhar suggests above, the shattering of maternal unicity (separating genetics from gestation from rearing) is permissible if it is seen in service of a social maternal unicity, which is itself first threatened by the “recalcitrant and chaste female body”--the infertile, hermetic, fragile figure of the liminal woman-about-to-be-(trying-to-be-)mother. In order to uphold the maternal in the face of a supposed infertility crisis, the maternal category is split into different functions, each of which then can be performed by various subjects. In order to preserve maternity, it seems, it must be reduced to its component parts.

In conclusion, what artificial insemination makes clear is that definitions of paternity and maternity based on genetics will no longer work, if they ever did. A patriarchal fear of sperm banks, demonstrated by Corea, requires new legal and medical negotiations of what paternity is, in order, as she sees it, for patriarchy to retain its power over an increasingly “anonymous” world. She lists some tactics used by medical doctors to “obliterate the sperm vendor,” most fascinatingly that they often “advise AID [artificial insemination by donor] couples not to tell the AID child or their family or friends how the child was conceived. ‘The majority of couples--something like 99 percent--choose not to tell anyone’” (Corea 54). What is surprising is that dissembling in this case both admits and denies the importance of genes. Why lie if it is not an issue? Why not lie if it is an issue? Another related medical strategy to increase paternal

uncertainty is a version of the firing squad's practice, where multiple donors' semen is used in each insemination. In this case, no one could possibly know, until after the child is testable (by blood or cell), which sperm donor is the "true" father, although if we can analogize to the cases of gestational surrogate mothers, it seems that we should conclude that they all are.¹⁰² These built-in functions of deceit, which work against a medical science's tendency to truth, objectivity, and certainty, are displaced onto the new sign of the gene, itself unable to bear such weight.

The material feminist problem I began with seems less and less convincing as the true issue of the "new" problem of surrogacy and how it relates to woman's relationship to science. Difference will always be found between men and women (that is, maintained, reinforced, reinscribed). My first staging of a feminist's problem as one of procreative biology is bothersome because it uses the same models of biological difference. Are genetic, hormonal, minute differences really where feminists want to take their stand? Shall we give up the body (a man's trick to assert rationality--let's all be men)? Or shall we draw nearer to it (same trick, different sides)? In the next section, I want to turn briefly to the role of fantasy in the construction of new family arrangements caused by new reproductive technologies.

¹⁰² I am not sure if similar statistics exist for the U.S., but Stanworth cites a study that showed that 25% of fathers in a British town could *not* be the father of the child they held as their own. This is likely also an urban legend, repeated, for example, in Rothman's *Recreating Motherhood* (225). A man's paternity, with blood tests, could not be conclusively proved, but it could be conclusively disproved. This changes with genetic testing, which can prove and disprove.

II. Freud and certainty (matters)

“In the case of surrogate motherhood, what is the child’s relationship with his or her birth mother (even if the relationship occurs only in the child’s fantasy life)?” (Office of Technology Assessment 304)

“I’ll give you three days to guess my name. If you find it out in that time, you may keep your child.” (“Rumpelstiltskin”)

Mary Beth Whitehead, the surrogate mother in the landmark “Baby M” case, reprints in her authorized narrative of the case a sympathetic letter to the editor of the New York Times. The letter refers to the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin in order to make a moral comparison between the “compassionate” Rumpelstiltskin (who allowed the Queen to keep the child promised to him) and the evil judge in the Baby M case (who wanted to take the child away from its mother). As in uses of the Genesis tale to explain surrogacy, this letter writer’s attempt to use the Rumpelstiltskin tale to point out a simple moral ignores many details of the original version. In the Brothers Grimm’s “Rumpelstiltskin,” for example, the manikin does not willingly give the child to the Queen, but rather is so angry at being tricked by her that he stamps his right leg so far into the ground that he tears himself in two when he pulls on his left one. The letter also leaves out the fact that the Queen was originally but a poor miller’s daughter, and that her marriage to the King only came about when she was able to show, with Rumpelstiltskin’s help, her economic prowess in turning straw into gold. When Rumpelstiltskin returns a year later to claim his child, the Queen tries to bribe him, but he refuses, holding “something alive” dearer than riches. He does, however, give her a second chance to keep the child by guessing his true name, but it is only by means of her messenger that the Queen is able to do so.

What a closer examination of the Rumpelstiltskin tale reveals is that its happy ending is a product of both the tale's complexity as well as our sympathy with the mother-child bond. Reading it in light of surrogacy arrangements in the 80s, there is a clear analogue in the incommensurable disagreement between the adoptive, promised father and the true, birth mother. Nancy J. Chodorow, using Alice Balint, shows how fathers tend to be more "real" to children's fantasy life, since children must work harder to separate themselves from their mother (Reproduction 79-80). Phyllis Chesler also comments on how often fairy tales feature either missing fathers or fathers "duped" by stepmothers (138). In "Rumpelstiltskin," the woman occupies both roles, moving from daughter to mother by means of Rumpelstiltskin's magical aid. Rumpelstiltskin, then, becomes a kind of false mother to the child, being that he has some legal or logical claim to the child. Yet, what makes Rumpelstiltskin so interesting is the way that he is also conceived, by his lack of a name, as a kind of anonymous second father. The manikin who appears to help the miller's daughter three times in a row stakes his claim on his anonymity, and it is the Queen's naming of Rumpelstiltskin that results not only in her keeping the child, but in the little man's self-destruction. Trading his name for the child, Rumpelstiltskin clearly illustrates the role that fantasy and naming play in fairy and family tales.

Describing some of the secondary effects of the new family arrangements in the 80s, Gena Corea in The Mother Machine reports that some women recipients of IVF "have fantasies about the man whose baby they are carrying. They feel that sperm vendors are supermen--studs chosen for their superior intelligence and strength" (55). In consequence of such fantasies, husbands tend towards latent hostility or jealousy towards

the child (giving another reason not to support surrogacy). Phyllis Chesler, a figure in the Baby M case, also discusses the role of fantasy in unusual family arrangements.

Specifically referring to mothers who give their children up for adoption, Chesler writes that “birth mothers often have recurring dreams of their lost children, and they may even follow children on the street whom they fantasize may be their own. . . . Birth mothers often imagine that their children are either already dead or still alive but suffering” (118); another reason to hesitate before giving your child up for adoption (and thus another reason not to support surrogacy). As these examples point out, surrogacy is generally figured as a maternal issue, and one that carries with it the mother’s potential for narrative exuberance. Looking at the mother’s anxieties mirrors, as has been pointed out by others, a shift in 80s feminists’ incursions into the role and definition of mothering and motherhood, which had earlier been focused on, for example, pre-Oedipal situations and those that develop from the mother-child relationship, generally from the point of view of the position of the child. This is especially clear in psychoanalytic feminist criticism (for example Chodorow and Kristeva)¹⁰³ which responds to the shortcomings in Freud’s account of the boy’s Oedipal situation with an equal insistence on the role that women (mothers) play in this development, and especially the differences between the boy’s and girl’s Oedipal figuration, seeking a positivist account that does not merely mirror masculine forms (“the blind spot of an old dream of symmetry”). Symbolically prompted by Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* and the “great unwritten story” of the “cathexis between mother and daughter,” the newer emphasis is on woman’s potential or

¹⁰³See Jane Gallop’s “Reading the Mother Tongue” on how the mother is especially important in the then surprisingly successful intervention between feminism and psychoanalysis. Gallop traces a double birth: on the one hand is Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, and on the other is Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). 1985 is for Gallop a “historic year,” producing the first anthology of psychoanalytic feminist criticism, *The M(O)ther Tongue*; “the heroine in the book is surely the mother” (317).

actual motherhood, as opposed to woman's actual daughterhood.¹⁰⁴ Marianne Hirsch's The Mother/Daughter Plot traces some of these late-70s and early-80s texts, and by considering the strangely non-maternal point of view of some mothers' stories, Hirsch begins a shift towards developing a theory of maternal discourse in order to avoid the trap of those who in their "daughterly perspectives . . . collude with patriarchy in placing mothers in the position of object, of other--thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and making maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility" (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 13). Rather, Hirsch "is trying to imagine what model or definition of subjectivity might be derived from a theory that began with mothers rather than children" (Hirsch, "Maternity" 94). Part of this model of subjectivity involves the very same fantasy practices that are evident in comparisons of surrogacy with Genesis, or Rumpelstiltskin. In The Mother/Daughter Plot, Hirsch emphasizes what she calls "family romance," which "describes the experience of familial structures as discursive: the family romance is the story we tell ourselves about the social and psychological reality of the family in which we find ourselves and the about the patterns of desire that motivate the interaction among its members" (9). Building on Hirsch's analysis, I would like to turn to another kind of fairy tale--Freud--to explore one way in which the new reproductive technologies' construction of surrogacy reflects other 80s concerns, especially ostensibly postmodern ones such as truth-telling, the question of forms of legitimacy, and a Freudian reinvention of the surface/depth model, concerned with simulations and simulacra and all other manner of superficiality imitating, replacing, or posing as reality.

In a short 1909 piece titled "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker," translated

¹⁰⁴ This was recently made clearer to me by a friend's mother who, seeing a homeless woman on the subway, pitifully exclaimed to me, "how horrible; that's someone's mother." I couldn't bring myself to point out that that need not be true, that she should have said "how horrible; that's someone's daughter."

simply as “Family Romances,” Freud describes the way in which a small child becomes disillusioned by the earlier idea of his parents being “the only authority and the source of all belief” (298). As the child grows, so does his disillusion: he discovers other parents, perhaps becomes jealous of siblings, or begins to experience sexual rivalry. “His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea . . . of being a step-child or an adopted child” (Freud 298). According to Freud, the neurotic does not remember this, but the non-neurotic often does, and we can treat the fascinating idea of each of us at one time considering--wishing--for other mothers and fathers as an idea both expressive of a child’s lifelong ambivalence towards parents, as well as one instrumental in a parent’s later constitution of their own “family romances” (and this last especially strengthened by some of the newer family forms under discussion). The child, to varying degrees,¹⁰⁵ fantasizes that his “true parents” are of higher social standing, and thereby escapes both his own lowly birth as well as his newly-found low opinion of his parents. Freud postulates that this all occurs during the time of a child’s sexual innocence, but

when presently the child comes to know the difference in the parts played by fathers and mothers in their sexual relations, and realizes that ‘*pater semper incertus est,*’ while the mother is ‘*certissima,*’ the family romance undergoes a curious curtailment: it contents itself with exalting the child’s father, but no longer casts any doubts on his maternal origin, which is regarded as something unalterable. (299)

Now, having learnt the facts of life at last, the child’s imaginative possibilities are cut off--

¹⁰⁵ Here, of course, I mean varying dependent upon the sex of the child; the boy, having a stronger imagination, thus “has a far more intense desire to get free from *him* than from *her*” (Freud 298). What are we to do with Freud, who, as Chodorow dryly puts it, “was only sometimes describing how women develop in a patriarchal society” (Reproduction 142)? It remains to be seen how family romances figure differently for a girl.

that is, the imaginative possibilities of and towards his mother. Yet, this is a “curious curtailment,” for in his certitude of the physical aspects of his maternal origin, the young child also allows himself to come to the secondary fantasy that his mother is a whore, brought “into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs” (Freud 299). This serves to satisfy some of his sexual curiosity, but can also, by a form of inversion, serve to re-legitimize the child by bastardizing his siblings. Freud, anticipating readers to be scandalized, calms us by showing that none of this in truth is really all that bad or harmful, for in fact imagined parents always have elements of real parents, and the child’s fantasies serve as a kind of compliment towards the father, since the child really only wants to return things back to the time when he exalted his parents, especially before the onset of disillusionment.

By focusing on the child’s discovery of sexual difference (and by misdirecting this all through what the adult neurotic does not experience),¹⁰⁶ Freud strangely moves past the way that *pater semper incertus est* might also form the mother and father’s experience of the family as parents.¹⁰⁷ Since *pater semper incertus est* is a Latinate legal tag, in Freud’s version of the Aristotelian revelation of the “difference in the parts played by fathers and mothers” we have no recourse to truth, or birds and bees, but rather to a stuffy, generically determined principle of law. What is interesting is that *pater semper incertus est* would seem foremost to involve the father’s anxiety about the paternity of his wife’s children, yet here the tag instead becomes the tool to resolve the child’s certainty about the mother. It is difficult not to see the father’s potential fear of the mother’s faithlessness--displaced and vanquished here as the son’s knowledge of the mother’s faithfulness--as in truth reflecting the deeply intertwined development of sons into

¹⁰⁶ Why this piece is specifically about the neurotic is never made clear--we get similar childhood processes in both types, with only a later differentiation that Freud does not elaborate.

¹⁰⁷ From this, we can utilize Hirsch’s search for “what model or definition of subjectivity might be derived from a theory that began with mothers rather than children” (“Maternity” 94).

fathers, a development in turn under the governance of fathers and mothers. We could thus read this as a story about a family's self-definition; the "Familienroman" of the title means both "family romance," but more specifically "family novel."¹⁰⁸ The use of "romance" suggests the imaginative sexual associations created by the parent's eventual discussion of sex. But "family novel" seems to highlight not only the narrative aspects of the family's story (demonstrated through history), but also (I hope for our purposes), the novelty that is created and cut off by the family's veiled and unveiled sexual *certus*--the mother as familial certainty, as constitutive of a child's only definitive sense of birthright.

For Freud, "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker" was about "childish depravity," about the neurotic child's imaginative life; however, we can see in the theory of the interruption by the knowledge of sexual difference upon all children's imaginative life the concept that families narrate themselves by establishing a gendered certainty involving the fact of parentage, and that this certainty--obliquely, legally put--in turn controls the kinds of imagination a child (let us say here, "boy") can have about his two parents.

Furthermore, we can see in the movement from uncertainty to certainty (from innocence to knowledge of sex), the structuring of the role of the maternal body, such that imagination is either curtailed, or only perversely applied. Of the father, of the father's own uncertainty (his child's uncertainty about him is mirrored literally by his own of his child) we can begin to see how the kind of anxieties normally inhering in the procreative facts about a family (the family's "romance," in both senses) already reflect a decisively uncertain (ambivalent) certainty on the part of the child regarding the truth he knows and subsequently imaginatively denies, an anxiety hence exacerbated by the new certain

¹⁰⁸ Nancy K. Miller pointed out to me the way that Roland Barthes, in Roland Barthes, also invokes the "family romance." In the picture section which opens his book (images which are Barthes's "treat" to himself for finishing the text) Barthes traces how his "family novel" is about generations and how they end up: "final stasis of this lineage: my body. The line ends in a being *pour rien*" (Barthes 19). Of course, this construction too lies under the text's epigraph: "it must all be considered as if spoken by" *un personnage de roman*--a character in a novel (Barthes 1).

uncertainty of the NRTS of the 80s. This anxiety, incidentally, appears true both of those technologies that are actually new (gestational surrogate motherhood) as well as those that are not (“traditional” surrogate motherhood).

Freud, being Freud, deals primarily with the male son’s imagination of the mother, privileging the boy over the girl by default. Yet, in “Family Romances,” the difference in effect on the child is important. Even though, for the non-neurotic, the adoption fantasy remains humorous, if remembered at all, it nonetheless plays an archetypal role in light of the new situations where what Freud matter-of-factly refers to as “the difference in the parts played by fathers and mothers in their sexual relations” is fragmented. That is, turning from Freud’s emphasis on the child’s imagination of the adult to an adult’s imagination of the child allows us to reconsider the fraught nature of the family romance, which especially expresses itself in the newly technologized 80s.

Sociologist Mary O’Brien discusses the way in which paternity is, at best, an abstract idea, while maternity is, at least during gestation, an experience. Furthermore, with new technological interventions, Gena Corea argues, “woman’s claim to maternity is being loosened; man’s claim to paternity is strengthened” (289). That is, paternity begins to be experienced while maternity becomes potentially abstract. Corea sees this abstraction as part of a larger patriarchal movement to recover men’s claim to paternity, weakened by artificial insemination practices and recovered by controlling women’s surrogate motherhood (244-45). It may be ironic that men embrace technology which could render them spermatically useless, but it is completely expected that patriarchy would seek a way to control all sexual experience, a technological advance upon the originary, prehistorical recognition of men’s role in procreation.¹⁰⁹ What commentators on

¹⁰⁹ Corea envisions the moment when men first realized that they played a part in procreation, and their consequent destruction of mothers as religious figures.

gestational surrogate motherhood cases fail to recognize is that the legal (and social) emphasis on genetic paternity is irrelevant in terms of the rather material nature of pregnancy. What would it matter to a pregnant woman, other than in a social sense, whose genes helped form the baby she carried? She's still pregnant, regardless of whether it is with "her" child or not. The unintended effect, though, of the possibility of impregnating a woman artificially is that the child a woman carries is separable from her *avant la lettre*. The difficulty of enacting and enforcing this separation is raised by abortion and fetal rights laws because a theory of individual liberties (such as an individual's right to her body) *requires* at some point in time such a separation; the fumbling over words to describe what happens inside a woman's body (gamete, blastocyst, zygote, pre-embryo, embryo, fetus, child), makes this clear.

Pater semper incertus est is no longer true in light of genetic or DNA testing.¹¹⁰ The other, maternally certain side of the equation, though, is also newly no longer true. The certainty of the mother (and hence the reduction of her imaginative hold over the child) is now contested in terms of her newly destabilized role, her shattered maternal unicity. Now that the "true" mother is no longer *certissima*, maternity necessitates a law like the one regarding genetic paternity. Worse, the certainty of the mother will be attempted to be forced by means of a legal agreement. The nature of a contract for maternity, so foreign to our senses of ourselves as children, itself represents the problem with thinking of motherhood outside of the biological paradigm; one wag points out that the very fact that legal contracts were seen as necessary in early surrogacy negotiations proves that there's a problem with surrogacy. There are two points of view to this: the genetic mother who does not gestate, and the gestating mother without genetic link. The

¹¹⁰ DNA profiling, invented in 1985, was first used in criminal cases in 1987, and became more widespread (because more reliable and inexpensive) in the early 1990s.

former is figured as taking advantage of the latter, and the heroines of surrogacy arrangements thus tend to be the latter. Yet, the strange fact that these arrangements allow men to get what they want most (what they have always been denied: *certus*), while women can “not get” what they “don’t want” (that is, can avoid the reduction to biological necessity) is not as promising as it might be because women can only “not get” what they “don’t want” by means of another woman’s body. Put otherwise, a woman desiring to be a mother without being pregnant needs to first find a body to be pregnant for her. For her to not be pregnant, she needs to find someone who wants not to be a mother. Under the new contracted surrogacy arrangements, a husband gets scientifically and legally verifiable certainty of paternity, while a wife can get the exact opposite. In the case of gestational surrogate mothers, the problem is that woman’s presumption of motherhood and right to their child is founded on, ironically, little more than her *certissima*. This, of course, is usually enough to satisfy a nurse in the delivery room, but as the dramatic court cases evinced, new laws would need to be configured to match possible disagreements in these new family romances.

OTA notes that “existing legal models of the role of the purely genetic connection between parent and child have been worked out in the context of fathers, not mothers” (239). Previously, a genetic connection between a man and a child made the man legally responsible for the child, whether he intended or desired the child, except when a court specifically rules otherwise, as in cases of abuse or abandonment leading to adoption. So, for example, a man cannot force a woman to have an abortion, and is legally responsible for the care of the offspring. But, this genetic rule poses problems for cases of artificial insemination; in 1954 an Illinois court ruled that inseminating a married woman constitutes adultery, even given a husband’s consent. These kinds of rulings were

changed with the Uniform Parentage Act of 1973 (also the year of the first IVF pregnancy and of *Roe V. Wade*), which provides the one crucial exception to the genetically determined paternity rule. The rule of “presumptive paternity” holds that a child born to a married woman is also to be legally considered the child of the husband, regardless of whether he is or is not the genetic father. So, if a wife is artificially inseminated with her husband’s consent, then the husband is considered by the law to be the father, and thus the sperm donor is not considered to be the legal father of a child conceived of his sperm. One more case is worth mentioning: *Michael H. v. Gerald D.*, an important 1989 U.S. Supreme Court in which the wife was impregnated by another man without the husband’s consent (or knowledge). The court upheld the rule of presumptive paternity, and so the cuckolded husband became the legal father. Since common law makes it difficult to challenge paternity, adultery is encouraged, with the implication that men can take biological advantage of the laws to beget offspring without legal (read: economic) consequence. In the case of genetic inheritance, this is getting something for nothing. We should also consider how sperm donors too get, genetically speaking, something for nothing, and how limits on the number of acceptable donations (and “type” of donations, in the case of disallowing homosexuals to donate) are figured as fears over incest. The solution to preventing too many of one man’s sperm from fertilizing too many different women’s eggs is to provide for more certainty of paternity--a donor database for example--which leads to the problem of this otherwise anonymous information being sought or discovered by any future offspring. While in these kinds of cases the advantage of gender is clear, the NRTs begin to allow the same possibility to women, a possibility I argue is part of the paternalistic legal system’s motivation to restrict such possibility--we are back to the potential erasure of biological difference, allowing a woman to have a child

without having had to be pregnant or impregnated.

What should be at the forefront of all of this, the interests of the child or future child, are generally put to the side.¹¹¹ In the case of sperm donation, the courts must weigh a child's right to knowledge about his or her paternity with a donor's right to privacy. Anonymous sperm donation is the most extreme example of *pater semper incertus est*, but even here the rule, being predicated upon the language of law, demonstrates flexibility. The legal dimensions make sense in terms of a child's right to know of inheritable diseases or genetic predisposition, but the ethical dimensions are more difficult once they involve the child's imaginative fantasies--the family romance he or she invents as part of his or her structure of being. OTA, for example, demonstrates the two dimensions, noting that "if children were genuinely harmed [psychologically or physically] by the fact of their noncoital conception" then there could be Constitutional argument to regulate some forms of IVF (226). When dealing with the question of truth-telling and confidentiality issues, however, OTA has a more difficult time. Posing the questions

should a child be told that his or her rearing parent is not the child's genetic and/or gestational parent, and also how he or she was conceived? Should information about a child's biological origin be kept on file? Should a child who is not living with his or her father or mother be entitled to at least some information about this genetic parent? Should a child be entitled to know the identity of the genetic father or mother and thus be afforded the opportunity to contact this parent?

OTA is unable to come up with any more acceptable an answer than to quote, of all people, Hegel: "children are potentially free and their life directly embodies nothing save

¹¹¹ In adoption narratives, the reason for this--the theme of genetic narcissism--is mentioned, but not fully elaborated.

potential freedom. Consequently they are not things and cannot be the property of their parents or others” (211-2). While these are of course questions that do not have “correct” yes or no answers (although some of our notions of Constitutional rights strongly influence us to say “yes” to each), it is clear that the question of the parent’s moment of revelation, at which OTA can only summon Hegel, is of great concern in creating the new parents of NRT children. The new or alternative reproductive technologies must use a fiction, a narrative, to create kinship or relationships that were previously “natural.” Freud is useful because, being modern, he nonetheless offers a very postmodern way of getting to the matter: a storytelling of the surface, about which the depth is rendered irrelevant.

In Chapter One I elaborated upon the “giving up” of history which is so problematic for the postmodern periodizing hypothesis. In light of personal history--lineage, parentage, inheritance, paternity and the matrilineal--we can briefly connect the dilemma over the new reproductive technologies with a more general cultural concern over the nature of authority, certainty, and legitimation in the 80s. One common formulation of the rubric of postmodernism involves a “crisis of legitimacy,” whether this is the legitimacy of certain cultures over others, of certain types or forms of knowledge, or of different strategies of representation. Anthropologist Sarah Franklin, examining “postmodern procreation,” explains this by arguing that “postmodernism describes the process whereby certain foundational distinctions or boundaries are breached, leading to a crisis of legitimacy: this process is occurring, for example, in traditional beliefs about parenthood, procreation, and kinship” (335). By connecting the crisis of legitimacy to procreation, Franklin follows a more general “extension” of the postmodern crisis to feminism and to women. The question of “authenticity,” whether referring to something

abstract like “information” or to something practical like “motherhood,” is always narrated, for example in the use of fairy tales or Biblical stories to account for, explain, and ultimately legitimate apparently new family or parenting structures. These are all, at heart, “new reproductive stories.”

Lyotard and Habermas are the two critics of the postmodern perhaps most associated with the “crisis of legitimacy.” Briefly put, Lyotard sees legitimation as the process whereby legislators authorize laws as norms; as such he is criticizing Habermas, who took an inverse position, seeing those under the law as legitimizing the legislators, and finding a legitimation crisis in this reversal. The crisis of legitimacy is one of those formulations that can be traced through the entire social sphere of postmodern life; Lyotard, though, refuses the supposed significance of this crisis:

turn-of-the-century Vienna . . . carried awareness of and theoretical and artistic responsibility for delegitimation as far as it could be taken. We can say today that the mourning process has been completed. There is no need to start all over again. . . . A kind of legitimation not based on performativity. . . is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. (Postmodern Condition 41)

The postmodern, as Lyotard describes it, seems not only to no longer mourn delegitimation, but also aggressively to disavow any feelings about its passing. The Postmodern Condition takes this in the direction of a new form of education based not on content but on structures: language games. The freedom from barbarity, the saving moment of linguistic practice, is based not on academic knowledge, but on a floating-

between, a transversal movement of such language games. The question is no longer “is it true?” but instead “what use is it?” (Lyotard, Postmodern Condition 51). Likewise, postmodern science, according to Lyotard, produces not the known, but the unknown (Postmodern Condition 61). This is yet another move that means to displace and to create further displacements in the “incredulity toward metanarratives” which most basically characterizes the postmodern (Lyotard, Postmodern Condition xxiv).

Applying these notions to surrogacy and IVF arrangements is unsettling; on the one hand, Lyotard’s suggestion that utility replaces truth is often invoked in legal contexts surrounding surrogacy, such as the idea that one’s “intent” to parent may supersede one’s actual (genetic) paternity or maternity. As mentioned earlier, lawyer Carmel Shalev wants to emphasize a feminine ethic of “responsibility” with a concomitant focus on an individual’s intent to be a parent. Alternatively, a critic of surrogacy warns that “parenting is more than a contractual statement of intentions” (Annas 2). It also seems that moving legitimation to one’s “linguistic practice and communicational interaction” would ultimately, in the case of surrogate mothers, be disadvantageous to those with limited practice or interaction. For his part, Lyotard sees the complicated social interactions present behind legitimation:

the question of the legitimacy of science has been indissociably linked to that of the legitimation of the legislator since the time of Plato. From this point of view, the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just, even if the statements consigned to these two authorities differ in nature.

The point is that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: they both stem from the same perspective, the same ‘choice’ if you will. (Postmodern Condition 8)

Following Lyotard, we can clearly see the new reproductive technologies of the 80s as being subsumable to postmodernism, even if this is only in their use variously to generate and to degenerate familial legitimacy. The narrative strategies used by surrogacy brokers as well as would-be parents further attests to the desire to imagine a world where the question “is it true?” is replaced by “what use is it?” This focus from the quick biological fact of procreation to the lifelong ethical determination of the family romance on the one hand represents just another formulation of the degendered, masculine discourse about the postmodern, but on the other hand it also may in turn provide a way to reconceive of family narratives along the lines of lived experience and not biological fact--who’s to say that Rumpelstiltskin would not be a better parent than the desperate miller’s daughter?

III. Baby M (mater)

*“Even an infant needs her own space.” (Judge Sorkow ***126, on “Baby M”)*

The galvanizing case for public opinion about the “new” reproductive techniques and the “new” surrogacy was “In the Matter of Baby ‘M,’ a Pseudonym for an Actual Person.”¹¹² In this case, begun 5 January 1987, William Stern brought suit against Mary Beth Whitehead for failing to fulfill her obligations in a surrogacy contract, a legal instrument not new, but not yet tested in the court system. Stern, Whitehead, and her husband Richard had signed an agreement in February 1985, brokered by Noel Keane’s Infertility Center of New York, which stipulated that Mrs. Whitehead would surrender a live infant to the Sterns; the infant would be created by means of artificial insemination (that is, Mr. Stern’s sperm and Mrs. Whitehead’s egg, and so *not* IVF), and for this

¹¹² “Baby M” was of course not the first instance where a woman has refused to give up her baby. Indeed, each of the issues at the center of the case had already been warned against years earlier, see especially Corea’s thorough outline. As such, what made this case important is not the details so much as the “social construction” of the case (cf. Harrison).

service she would be paid \$10,000, plus ancillary medical costs not covered by her insurance.¹¹³ Also in the contract were stipulations regarding Mr. Whitehead (he would relinquish legal right to be considered the father of the child born to his wife), the event of miscarriage or stillbirth (if occurring after the fourth month, then Mrs. Whitehead would receive a nominal \$1,000), and payment to the infertility center (Mr. Stern would pay \$7,500 for its services). Mrs. Whitehead was delivered of a girl 27 March 1986, but she signed a birth certificate which read “Sara Elizabeth Whitehead” instead of the agreed upon “Melissa Elizabeth Stern.”

What happened next is complicated, as the infant is passed back and forth between the Sterns and Whiteheads (and at one notable point, surreptitiously passed between Mrs. and Mr. Whitehead through a bedroom window to avoid the police in the next room [Sorkow ***148]). In short, Whitehead refused both the \$10,000 and to surrender the child. After the Sterns responded with a police-enforced court order (later judged to be unenforceable), the Whiteheads fled the state of New Jersey and began what the trial judge in the case, Hon. Harvey R. Sorkow,¹¹⁴ described as both a “hegira” (**149) and an 87-day “fugitive existence” (**48) in Florida. Ultimately, Sorkow ruled that the surrogacy contract must be enforced, but with reservations about the lack of laws regarding surrogacy contracts and the problem with analogizing these kinds of cases with adoption cases (**87-8). Additionally, and somewhat extraordinarily, Sorkow terminated Mary Beth Whitehead’s parental rights, and Mr. Stern was adjudged to be the legal father and given permanent custody of the child, thereby allowing his wife Elizabeth

¹¹³ According to OTA, this was the most common fee (OTA 275). In “Baby M,” the payment is stipulated to be a “compensation for services and expenses,” not “a fee for termination of parental rights or a payment in exchange for a consent to surrender the child for adoption,” yet the fee is only payable upon surrender of live infant (cf. Wilentz). See the contract as Appendix A to Wilentz or as Appendix A to Chesler.

¹¹⁴ Since the case was later sent to the Supreme Court, I am dealing with two different judges (Sorkow and Wilentz) and two different opinions. For clarity’s sake, I’ll cite the opinions by judge’s name, as opposed to case number.

to adopt the child (becoming the legal mother). Judge Sorkow needed to go to some lengths to terminate Whitehead's parental rights because such termination is "an extraordinary judicial remedy which is to be granted only after intensive consideration of parental conduct and the needs of the child" (**135). In fact, state statutes specifically require evidence of actual abuse or abandonment by a parent in order legally to terminate parental rights, but Sorkow momentarily circumvented this requirement by invoking the doctrine of *parens patriae* and the court's role in regulating the best interests of the child.¹¹⁵ The media had been interested in the case since the baby was dramatically taken from the Whiteheads in Florida (she in the hospital, her daughter beating the police with a hairbrush as they knocked the maternal grandmother to the ground), but it was the termination of Whitehead's parental rights which outraged and rallied public commentary. On appeal, the Supreme Court of New Jersey ultimately overturned that part of Sorkow's decision; that court's opinion, by Chief Justice Wilentz, invalidated the surrogacy contract and ruled that such contracts were unenforceable, except perhaps in cases where no compensation is given and the mother is given the opportunity to revoke the contract after giving birth.¹¹⁶ Additionally, Chief Justice Wilentz annulled Mrs. Stern's adoption of the baby and restored Whitehead's parental rights. While Mr. Stern would retain custody of the child, Mrs. Whitehead was given visitation rights to be spelled out in a later ruling (cf. Sween, "In the Matter of Baby 'M'").

This was an important legal case as well as a dramatic social one. In the public

¹¹⁵ *Parens patriae* allows the courts to act as parents to minors, protecting their best interests in cases where there are no parents or the parents are in conflict. Sorkow argues "that *parens patriae* continues to exist with a power even greater than specific statutory grants" (**136). Later, Wilentz disagreed, "the Legislature would not have so carefully, so consistently, and so substantially restricted termination of parental rights if it had intended to allow termination to be achieved by one short sentence in a contract" (**38, cf. **43).

¹¹⁶ Sorkow had ruled that the contract could be revoked only up until the time of conception, and the contract is valid at the moment of conception: "the male gave his sperm; the female gave her egg in their pre-planned effort to create a child--thus a contract" (**91-2 and **93), or, as the media more succinctly put it: "sperm seals the deal."

imagination, much was made of the moral character and social standing of the principal actors, lending a soap opera quality to the proceedings while simultaneously investing the trial court's decision with much apparent social weight. The court battle was primarily configured as one between the Stern household and the Whitehead household, and in particular one between Mr. Stern and Mrs. Whitehead, *the* figured couple, as commentators and the public first tried to make sense of the arrangement as they knew how--to see it as a custody dispute, as a lover's squabble, as an argument between parents. Even Judge Sorkow must remind himself and us that "Mrs. Whitehead and Mr. Stern were never a family unit" (**144); "these people are not former spouses. They are strangers to each other" (**60). Simply put, this story is about a man who badly wanted a child, and a woman later coming to the same realization, but for lack of other examples of this kind of situation, "Baby M" was played out more or less as if it were a complicated adoption case, despite the underpinning contractual nature of the dispute. For this reason, public sympathy was initially overwhelmingly on the side of the Sterns, who appeared to better represent what parents should be. Yet, as we shall see, once Judge Sorkow said that Whitehead was not a mother, doing so in a particularly cruel way that blurred her biological position with her social position, Whitehead's claim to the child proved to be a compelling rallying point, leading many observers to "forgive" her.

And so public sympathies shift with progressive revelations: first, we learn that Mr. Stern's wife Elizabeth was infertile, her multiple sclerosis preventing her from bearing children without risk of grave injury to herself. However, Mrs. Stern, more properly Dr. Stern (she holds both an M.D. and a Ph.D. in Human Genetics, working professionally as a pediatrician), turns out to have self-diagnosed her multiple sclerosis in

1979, a diagnosis not definitively confirmed and thus marginalized¹¹⁷ and one made when the effect of pregnancy in exacerbating multiple sclerosis was unknown (Sorkow ***25). Judge Sorkow is willing to accept that Mrs. Stern had “a fixed . . . understanding that she could not carry a child without great risk to her physical well-being” (***27 and ***102),¹¹⁸ although a more cynical view sees her as using multiple sclerosis as an excuse for the opportunity to further her career by taking advantage of another woman’s apparent willingness to bear children for her. Additionally, we learn that Mr. Stern also holds a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and “ran a genetics laboratory” (Harrison 302), which raises the question of how two well-educated scientists could possibly enter into such an arrangement with a partly employed high school dropout (Mary Beth) and an alcoholic garbage man (Richard) with such seeming naiveté (cf. Sorkow ***45). Apparently they did not, some argue; and the Baby M case was read by many as “baby-selling, pure and simple” (Kimbrell). Pregnancy contracts, especially those involving gestation of a woman’s own ovum, “might as usefully be compared to contracts for consensual slavery as to other kinds of employment contracts” (Shanley 629). Even if it looks like freedom to do so, Shanley points out, one cannot freely give up future freedom or Constitutionally contract away Constitutional rights.¹¹⁹ Katha Pollitt, writing in The Nation, remarks upon the unusualness of such a set of circumstances and uses another metaphor: “so-called surrogacy agreements are so unprecedented that the resulting human arrangements bear no

¹¹⁷ “She probably had multiple sclerosis” (Sorkow ***24) although “her anxiety appears to have exceeded the actual risk” (Wilentz ***9).

¹¹⁸ Sorkow thereby also gives a broader definition to “infertility”: “the inability to conceive and carry to term without serious threat of harm to one’s physical well-being” (Sorkow ***102). OTA notes that “numerous physicians and hospitals have come to treat pregnancy as an abnormal, highly dangerous (almost diseased) state” (326). In this light, what pregnancy cannot be read as a “threat of harm”? Firestone had put it more bluntly: “pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species” (188).

¹¹⁹ As in the above footnote, I wonder how theoretical negotiations of surrogate motherhood will in turn affect “regular” motherhood. If a surrogacy contract is like consensual slavery, would that make pregnancy without a contract analogous to nonconsensual slavery? If surrogacy contracts morally require evidence of infertility, will more women “become” infertile?

resemblance to adoption, illegitimacy, custody after divorce, or any other relationship involving parents and children, yet, at the same time, bear an uncanny resemblance to the all-sales-final style of used-car lot” (667).

Yet, another detail about Mr. Stern turns our sympathies back to him: he was born in Berlin in January 1946 to “parents who were the sole surviving members of his family to escape the Holocaust” (Sorkow ***22). His father died when Mr. Stern was 12, and “with the death of his mother in 1983, Mr. Stern became the only surviving member of all branches in his family” (Sorkow ***23). Whitehead was artificially impregnated 13 months after Stern’s mother’s death; he is reported to have said Kaddish each day for the year of mourning. His mother’s death becomes, in Stern’s mind, one specific reason against adoption and offers in place a heart-wrenching motivation for surrogacy (and gives our narrative another absent mother). Commenting later on the Sterns’ intentions, Chief Justice Wilentz also sympathizes with Mr. Stern’s past: “the decision had special significance for Mr. Stern. Most of his family had been destroyed in the Holocaust. As the family’s only survivor, he very much wanted to continue his bloodline” (***10). The maternal loss, figured here as a material loss--the bloodline contained in his gamete--becomes an obsessive purpose. What is important to the Sterns is not *their* child, but his bloodline, the responsibility for which, after the loss of his mother, falls to him. Yet some were not persuaded by this. Psychologist David Brodzinsky, called by the court-appointed guardian *ad litem*, offers commentary on Mr. Stern appropriate for a juvenile delinquent’s rap sheet: “the ambivalent relationship with his mother through his formative years [has] left [its] mark on Mr. Stern” (Chesler 177). Chesler uses such details to suggest that the media (incorrectly) blew up the Holocaust angle, leaving Stern more sympathetic. She goes on to suggest that Stern’s Jewishness is

confused, as he picks a Catholic woman to be his surrogate, knowing surely that under Jewish law his child would be Jewish only if the mother was.

On the other hand, Mary Beth Whitehead's character is savaged by Judge Sorkow and the Sterns' expert witnesses; even given the clear bias against Whitehead that Sorkow demonstrated in his handling of the case, the press at first seemed to follow his lead. Clearly, as was shown after the first trial, much of Sorkow's treatment of Mary Beth Whitehead is patently unfair. He labels her simply "a woman without empathy" (**132). One of the expert witnesses, Dr. Schechter, paints Whitehead as unfit: she handed Baby M out a window to escape the police, she fled to Florida and stayed in different hotels, she violated a contract. Most outlandish are three specific issues Schechter cites to support his diagnosis of "mixed personality disorder" due to the presence of her "impulsivity, manipulative behavior, a sense of self-importance, exploitiveness, lack of sympathy and justification through provocation" (Sorkow ***63-4): she dyes her graying hair, she brought stuffed panda bears for Baby M to play with instead of pots and pans, and she said "hooray" instead of "patty cake" when Baby M was playing the game of the same name. Critics had a field day with these more ridiculous testimonies; a letter, "We Are All Unfit Mothers," signed by 129 women including Gloria Steinem, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Sontag, Betty Friedan, and Meryl Streep, sought to show the incoherencies in the specialist's depiction of maternal fitness. By selecting and isolating individual statements used by the court to demonstrate unfitness, such as "Mrs. Whitehead feels . . . that her role as a biological mother enables her to understand her children better than anyone else," the "Unfit Mothers" letter showed how these indications of unfitness are also contradictorily culturally valued assumptions about motherhood (cf. Peterson and Chesler for full text and signatories).

“If the woman [in a surrogacy arrangement] wants to keep the child, she becomes ‘doubly deviant’: first, for entering contractual relations and, second, for renegeing on these obligations. As a result, the woman may be labeled ‘unfit’ and her claims to her child undermined” (Anleu 32). So, by being a “fit mother” (that is, refusing to give up her child), a woman becomes an “unfit mother” (by refusing to honor a legal contract). In his decision, Sorkow finds that “she is a good mother for and to her older children. She would not be a good custodian for Baby M” (**132), which is both contradictory and coherent. Is she a good “custodian” for her older children? Granted that she would not be a “good custodian” to Baby M, would she be a “good mother” “for” Baby M, or “to” Baby M?

Chief Justice Wilentz, finally standing up for Whitehead, puts it as such: “we do not know of, and cannot conceive of, any other case where a perfectly fit mother was expected to surrender her newly born infant, perhaps forever, and was then told she was a bad mother because she did not” (**88). Wilentz sees more clearly that both parties’ behavior is motivated “undoubtedly because of their own self-interest” (**11). “The depth of their conflict about Baby M, about custody, visitation, about the goodness or badness of each of them, comes through in their telephone conversations. . . . The dashed hopes of the Sterns, the agony of Mrs. Whitehead, their suffering, their hatred--all were caused by the unraveling of this arrangement” (Wilentz **49). In retrospect, sympathy is due her for her unfair treatment in the courtroom and media, some of which Judge Wilentz provides, yet even a sympathetic party has difficulty accounting for all of Whitehead’s actions, especially those stemming from the “unraveling of this arrangement.” For example, Whitehead had threatened over the telephone to accuse falsely Stern of sexually abusing her 10-year-old daughter--a threat Stern tape-recorded

and played back in court (Sorkow ***49). Also, Sorkow criticizes Whitehead's "bringing of her older daughter to court where the child was terrorized by the crush of media and [Whitehead's] fawning use of the media to her own narcissistic ends" (Sorkow ***125 and Sorkow ***33). Finally, the most frightening, but simultaneously empty, is another of Whitehead's threats to Stern: "'I'd rather see me and her [Baby M] dead before you get her,' and 'I gave her life, I can take her life away'" (Sorkow ***49). While for political activists, this is a problem (for example, Chesler worries about how good a public figure Whitehead will make), Whitehead's complex character and the imperfection of her claim to her child best dramatize the uncertainty among all commentators on the case, whether it is the judges trying to decide the child's best interests, feminists trying to decide whether surrogacy arrangements are liberatory or essentialist, or the public's own imagination of what kind of women mothers are or can be.

Mr. Stern ironically alters Whitehead's threat to do away with Baby M, saying that, absent a decision that he be awarded sole custody, he would not want to share custody or take advantage of visitation rights (Sorkow ***62). While Whitehead would rather have no child than give one to Stern, Stern would rather give Whitehead the child than share it. For this selflessness, the court sees him as a better parent, which is shown again when it is recounted how he at first gave a distraught Whitehead, who claimed to be suicidal, Baby M; Judge Sorkow saw this as demonstrating not flawed parenting (giving your child to a supposedly suicidal woman), but rather "immense concern for Mrs. Whitehead" (***45). Possessing the wisdom of Solomon, Mr. Stern is able to "subordinate his wishes for his daughter and give up visitation" (Sorkow ***83-4), while Mrs. Whitehead is labeled "self-important" for seeing herself as a mother and therefore considering the child as hers. The lesson is that Stern has to demonstrate that he can give

up the child in order rightfully to claim it, while Whitehead's mistake is making a direct claim for the child itself, and not her own motherly ability. Interestingly, in Whitehead's own narrative of events, she describes how her own mother's initial advice had made her angry; she had advised Mary Beth to remember the story of Solomon (Whitehead 33).

Discounting the seriousness of her threats to harm herself or her child,¹²⁰ the most troublesome issue with Whitehead's character (for both judges, for feminists trying to decide their allegiances, for this reader) involves her truth-telling ability. I hold that this is not only an issue configured by the juridical requirements of a public court case, but one that further reflects those issues of parentage raised by Freud and the crisis of legitimacy which is meant to mark the postmodern moment.

Mary Beth Whitehead can in many ways be simply represented as a liar--breaking her contract with the Sterns, lying to the court in an effort to win custody, even lying to her parents about keeping Baby M (Sorkow ***141). In addition to breaking a contract (whether "truly" legal or not), she at one point suggests to the court that the child is actually her husband's, since they had intercourse prior to her conception. The court found this an impossible claim after a blood test revealed that Richard had had a voluntary vasectomy nine years earlier. Furthermore, the Whiteheads already had two children, testifying that after the birth of their second child in 1976 (the first was born in 1974) they "decided that they did not want to have any more children, that they were 'content' with two children and thought they had the 'perfect family'" (Sorkow ***299). "The Whiteheads had created their family and wanted no further children" (Sorkow ***29), which further demonstrates the unfairness of Whitehead's later claim to Baby M; since

¹²⁰ As we shall see in a moment, the fact that it is Bill Stern she addresses is part of the reason it can be discounted.

she already had two children and the Sterns had none, she was apparently dissembling in her representation of her own familial satisfaction.

Along these lines, the most intriguing passages in the case occur in relation to the judges' considerations of how and when the different parents would reveal the truth of the child's origins to Baby M. Whitehead's "inconsistent stories about various things engendered grave doubts about her ability to explain honestly and sensitively to Baby M--and at the right time--the nature of her origin" (Wilentz ***85). On the other hand, the Sterns "are honest; they can recognize error, deal with it, and learn from it. . . . When the time comes to tell her about her origins, they will probably have found a means of doing so that accords with the best interests of Baby M" (Wilentz ***86-7). The best interests here are psychological in nature, and it almost goes without saying that honesty is in the best interests of a child born under these new social arrangements. The measure of the judge's uncertainty that the mother or father will provide for the child's own certainty is twofold: genetic and rearing. That is, it is not admitted that Whitehead *could* lie about Baby M's father, or that Baby M *could* be successfully reared with false knowledge. Ironically, the new genetic certainty, which undoes *pater incertus est*, in turn prompts a legal uncertainty in a parent's rearing practices. Put otherwise, the formula Freud uses is both undone by "new" reproductive technologies (science *can* identify fathers) as well as reversed by them (a judge has trouble legally identifying a mother). Judge Sorkow in particular doubts that Whitehead would tell the truth, specifically because of her refusal to privilege Mr. Stern's verifiable paternity: "to this day she still appears to reject any role Mr. Stern played in the conception. She chooses to forget that but for him there would be no child" (**129).¹²¹ Sorkow, concerned like Freud with the child's fantasies

¹²¹ Dr. Schechter puts it in economic terms, noting that Mrs. Whitehead gives "no value to the genetic contribution of Mr. Stern" (Sorkow ***64).

of the parents, uses *parens patriae* to forestall potential parental uncertainties. Also, in Sorkow's eyes, it is apparent that while there can be no child without a father, there *can* be a child without a mother. Sorkow's phrasing establishes the certainty of paternity as a prerequisite for pregnancy: "but for him there would be no child."¹²² Ironically, this kind of certainty is upset by the language of the original contract: "RICHARD WHITEHEAD further acknowledges he will do all acts necessary to rebut the presumption of paternity of any offspring conceived" (Wilentz ***107). This legal maneuver to avoid presumptive paternity laws is not upheld, as Mr. Whitehead's name is affixed to the birth certificate at the hospital, taking advantage of his uncertain state to certify himself as father.

The problem with looking at the judge's engagement with the principals is that it ignores what to me is the crucial aspect of this case: the relationship between the two battling mothers, Mary Beth Whitehead and Elizabeth Stern. Clearly, their's is the relationship most important in this narrative, but the one least present in the textual/legal records. So taken up with the issue of parentage, the case (both in Chancery and Supreme court, as well as in the commentary) is figured repetitively by the familiar. While both judges are sailing into uncharted territory (and thus cautiously recognize the newness of the situation), the law is forced nonetheless to apply itself to already established forms, and so the Baby M case becomes just an odder, more complex adoption case: Mr. Stern vs. Mrs. Whitehead. Yet, what I would like to find is the way that women talk to women in these kinds of negotiations; the much more crucial relationship for understanding the new surrogacy arrangements is the one between Betsy Stern and Mary Beth Whitehead. One effaced in the court documents, the other overdetermined by scores of shrinks and

¹²² Also, according to Sorkow, this is not baby-selling, since Stern "cannot purchase what is already his" (***88).

media pundits, the two of them together pose problems for how women will or can negotiate their own relationships in light of the “new” reproductive technologies.

Elizabeth Stern’s name is continually, explicitly, written out of the Baby M case. First is the contract where she is not named (leaving three men as signatories to a contract of the fate of a child, who turns out to be female), presumably in order to avoid violating state baby-selling statutes (ironically, this is the same reason that Richard Whitehead *is* named in those contracts). While Elizabeth Stern’s name never appears, she is indirectly mentioned twice; first is in relation to the document’s attempt to portray this arrangement as one for services and not for a baby: “the sole purpose of this arrangement is to enable WILLIAM STERN and his infertile wife to have a child which is biologically related to WILLIAM STERN” (Wilentz ***106).¹²³ The second mention occurs in a clause dealing with the event of Mr. Stern’s death, in which case “the child will be placed in the custody of WILLIAM STERN’S wife” (Wilentz ***113). It is easy to see this other Stern as both victim and villain of the case. She is villainized because of the inequality of her social status and appearance in relation to Mary Beth (a doctor versus a former “barroom dancer”), as especially configured around the suggested doubt regarding Mrs. Stern’s self-diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (a detail, incidentally, used to humanize Mrs. Stern). Portrayed as uptight, repressed, put-together, Betsy Stern most of all appears to be trying to get something for nothing--a baby without labor. Yet, in the contract and in court, she is excluded even from the fruits of Whitehead’s womb. Barbara Katz Rothman, for example, points out that it is Mrs. Stern who quit work in order to care for Baby M, although Mr. Stern is the one photographed while carrying Baby M to and from court--visibly parenting away (“Comment” 314-5).

¹²³ cf. Wilentz ***7-8 and ***28. Wilentz isn’t buying it: “we have no doubt whatsoever that the money is being paid to obtain an adoption and not, as the Sterns argue, for the personal services of Mary Beth Whitehead” (**25).

While Rothman provides some needed perspective on the case, she is using Elizabeth's role to make a claim about the dynamic at the Stern household. In the context of Mary Beth and Elizabeth's relationship, it is interesting to see how critics figure the two of them collectively. The "decision" made between these two women (one that is left implicit and not legally contracted), which the rhetoric of the case seems to necessitate, undoes the larger issue of motherhood. By focusing on whether Mary Beth or Betsy would be a better mother (and this is done either by reference to biology or economics, subspecies of nature and nurture), the terms of the debate are already ignored. Phyllis Chesler, in her book on the case, Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M,¹²⁴ discusses the evidently binary nature of the two women, who also physically resemble one another: they are "two sides of the same coin, the Janus head" (Merle Hoffman qtd. in Chesler 23). Hoffman continues, giving us the following pairs: Whitehead *vs.* Stern; passion *vs.* mind; blood, tissue, guts, need, sex *vs.* intellect, control and alienation; mother *vs.* career; bad girl *vs.* good girl; whore *vs.* virgin and immaculate conception; Elizabeth I *vs.* Mary, Queen of Scots; Athena *vs.* Venus (qtd. in Chesler 24-5). With these distinctions in place, Chesler suggests, public admiration of Betsy Stern is admiration of a woman acting like a man, not only in the refusal of pregnancy, but also in adopting the rational, intelligent sense of entitlement and the disavowal of the bad, sexual body in favor of a new kind of feminine-masculine parenting. The public's question--who is a better mother--is answerable by a far simpler question--who is better, mother or father?

Chesler reads Betsy as a man in women's clothing: she is "pale, gaunt, accomplished, incredibly narrow at the wrist, waist, pelvis, and ankle, the most 'masculine' (i.e., the least emotionally expressive) of Baby M's four parents" (24).

¹²⁴ Chesler is a direct participant in the case, befriending the Whiteheads and organizing press conferences and demonstrations.

Chesler asks “did Betsy really want a baby--as much as Bill did? Bill is quoted everywhere, ad nauseam, on his feelings about having a child. It is surprising how few public statements Betsy seems to have made on the subject” (25). Betsy’s public quietude, rather than being read as feminine meekness, is used against her in keeping with her overly-masculine nature; in Chesler’s eyes she is so much of a man in comparison to the other principals that her true maternal desire becomes suspect. Chesler here seems to figure the masculine as a repressed feminine; Betsy is the least emotionally expressive, is the tightest of all of them, and so appears as most masculine. Yet, Chesler also makes the opposing claim that “Betsy is hardly an emancipated woman. Betsy moves in the same patriarchal trance or fugue state that moves Mary Beth” (25). Picking out some of Betsy’s testimony to demonstrate how she parroted Bill’s testimony of the previous day, Chesler finds Betsy both subservient to Bill’s desires under patriarchy (never questioning his wishes) at the same time as she is the model, for the court, of patriarchy (having a male career, she would never become pregnant [Chesler 43]). Who’s the real mother? The maternally grief-stricken Bill Stern. Who’s the real father? The maternally masculine Betsy Stern.

Mary Beth Whitehead is later brought into Chesler’s organization of the confused Stern household. Chesler intimates that Whitehead’s desire for a child was actually a desire for a parent: “does the surrogacy-contract mother want to *be* a ‘surrogate’ mother-- or does she want to *have* a ‘surrogate’ mother for herself?” (40). By means of italics, we can read through Chesler’s question the two possibilities available to women in this situation: existence or possession. “Being a surrogate mother” or “having a surrogate mother” is an odd way of deciphering the potential relationships women can have in the face of new maternal arrangements, and when what the woman “had” was a female infant,

the possession of women becomes more bothersomely tangible. Whitehead continually invokes the phrase “my baby,” to which Baby M would presumably counter with “my mother.” We shall see momentarily that the right to be called “my mother” (or rather, the right to construct the family narrative around such a self-referential statement) is what is at stake. Chesler, perhaps overwhelmed by Betsy’s self-evident masculinity, has a difficult time conceiving of an equal relationship between Mrs. Stern and Mrs. Whitehead. Suggesting that it would have been more natural for Mary Beth to speak only to Mr. Stern questions the significance of Mary Beth’s surrogate act; despite the contracted desire to structure the situation to the contrary, for Whitehead this is a gift not to Mr. Stern but to Mrs. Stern. In retrospect, traditional surrogacy arrangements such as this appear to present a gift to men (they get from another woman what they are unable to get from their wife), and this seems to be how Chesler sees it. Instead of finding a gift between women, Chesler finds Whitehead treating Mrs. Stern not as another woman, but as a parent, and specifically (probably) a father. Mary Beth is her own baby, and Betsy becomes Mary Beth. Or, villainous Betsy becomes Bill, and Bill becomes Betsy, or becomes Mary Beth. Or, Baby M becomes Bill’s own surrogate mother.¹²⁵

Chesler is keen to read Betsy Stern as a traitor to her cause, both grasping for patriarchal power and simultaneously falling under it. In her own narrative, *A Mother’s Story: The Truth About the Baby M Case*, published a year after the Supreme Court decision, Mary Beth Whitehead reveals a less nuanced picture of Betsy Stern, yet one that is still strangely loving despite its bitterness. Interestingly, the text’s most dramatic moments--Mary Beth admitting to the Sterns that she is keeping the baby, being

¹²⁵ Chesler argues that Mr. Stern was so self-loathing that he wanted a Christian baby to stand in for his overbearing, “pushy,” Jewish, Holocaust-surviving mother (42).

assaulted in her home and fainting, being thrown bloody into the back of a police car--are filtered not through the judge, not through the infertility center, not even through Mr. Stern, but rather always through Betsy; they are in each case clearly addressed from one mother's point-of-view to another. For example, Mary Beth first called Betsy to tell her she was pregnant; she first told Betsy, over the phone, that she did not want payment; when offered more money, Mary Beth addresses Betsy in an interior monologue; it is Betsy whom she calls the morning after giving the baby to the Sterns; next Betsy telephones her to try to retrieve the baby; she is physically assaulted by Betsy; it is Betsy who "instructs" the police to take the child away; and it is Betsy who later attacks Mary Beth's character in court (Whitehead 92, 21, 22, 30, 33, 35, 46, 129). If Betsy Stern was effaced in the surrogacy contract and court opinions, she is writ large in Whitehead's imagination. On the other hand, Bill Stern is, like the procreative role he played, practically nonexistent during this time; "during the seven months that I was regularly inseminated with Bill Stern's sperm, we remained intimate strangers. I learned very little about the man whose child I bear" (Whitehead 91).¹²⁶ This feeling was shared, in fact, by Mr. Stern; in a footnote, Chesler gives us a fascinatingly suggestive bit of Dr. Levine's testimony not reported in the media:

During the course of the pregnancy, Mrs. Whitehead expressed a desire to deal only with Mrs. Stern, and then after the pregnancy she rarely spoke to Dr. Stern even on the telephone. Dr. Stern said that he felt like an intruder, that Mrs. Whitehead was carrying his baby and he felt extremely awkward. (206)

Early in her narrative, Whitehead soliloquizes Betsy Stern. Whitehead is still recuperating in the hospital after delivery, having more or less decided to keep the child, when the Sterns arrive and offer her more money. Whitehead reports,

¹²⁶ This, tellingly, in a chapter called "My Marriage to Rick."

I looked at Betsy Stern and thought to myself, “Betsy I’m not selling this child. I started this when I actually believed it *wasn’t* my child. Everyone had convinced me that it was your child, but going through the pregnancy and the pain of labor . . . has made me realize that this is *my* baby, not yours, mine.” But I didn’t say anything. I just burst into tears. (22)

Mary Beth’s inability to speak her own mind, a flaw she repeatedly laments as it causes more confusion and hurt, is portrayed here and throughout as a potential conversation between mothers.¹²⁷ Initially, Mary Beth seems to have literally believed that “it *wasn’t* my child,” suggesting elsewhere that she thought, until the day of delivery, that the baby was in fact genetically related to both Sterns, and that her role in the arrangement was similar to one she had seen in a film, where a gestational surrogate mother, after some conflict, happily gives her child away (Whitehead 32, 8).¹²⁸ Whitehead tells us that “the concept of an egg remained a meaningless abstraction. I didn’t think of it as the genetic substance of my child. *No one* ever said to me, ‘It’s your baby’” (12). While recognizing that she had some part to play in the matter, Whitehead seems to have confused her eggs with her womb, and “it wasn’t until the day I delivered my daughter that I fully comprehended the fact that it wasn’t Betsy Stern’s baby” (12). Conflating narratives of birth and the loss of innocence, the joy of birth and the recognition of the bond with the child is figured as the arrival of knowledge. Whitehead’s text is filled with phrases such as “looking back” or “I now know,” but here is the originary moment where Whitehead begins to learn for herself the truth of the matter. After Noel Keane, the surrogate broker, suggests Whitehead go to counseling, she angrily refuses him, explaining, “I *know* what

¹²⁷ Ultimately, this communication, halting throughout, would end. In the fifth month of Whitehead’s pregnancy, she “felt [Betsy] was so overbearing that [she] simply stopped communicating” (Whitehead 94).

¹²⁸ This, incidentally, is the arrangement that the Sterns had initially desired, yet they were dissuaded by IVF’s still experimental nature. (Sorkow***34).

I'm doing. The girls who give away their babies are simply in a deeper state of denial" (33). As in the earlier quote, Whitehead locates her sense of herself as a mother in the act of her knowledge of the child; what made her realize that she could not part with the child was having the child in the first place. Recall her complaint about the infertility center nurses: "*No one* ever said to me, 'It's your baby,'" a piece of information which Whitehead, despite the surrogate broker's efforts to the contrary, manages to learn for herself. We truly know not what we miss, until it arrives. However, exactly *when* Whitehead figured out she was keeping the child is hard to determine. She suggests a number of times that it was at the moment of birth; in retrospect, though, she places it earlier: for example, at the beginning of the ninth month, Betsy calls and says she bought baby clothes that day, as did Whitehead, who thinks "this woman is planning to take *my* baby home with her" (96). Ultimately, that question seems impossible to answer given both parties' construction and counter-construction of their family narratives.

Betsy Stern, like all good villains, has two apparent natures. When Mary Beth finally tells the Sterns she is keeping the baby, "first, the color drained from Betsy's face. Then she became violently angry. It was my first taste of Betsy Stern when she didn't get her way" (Whitehead 34-5). "I had said yes to her over and over, but it wasn't until now, when I said no, that her true colors came out" (Whitehead 35). According to Whitehead, Betsy violently attacks Mary Beth, whose uterus begins to contract, doubling her over. "Give that baby to Bill" or "Give Bill that baby" Betsy shouts over and over, and Bill is too paralyzed, crying, to do anything. Betsy "stuns" Mary Beth by her behavior, by the expression of her "adamant," violent desire for Bill to have the baby. This scene is far too melodramatic to take serious; Betsy becomes Bill's foot soldier simultaneously as Bill is reduced to whimpering on the periphery. Mary Beth's uterine

contractions, causing her to almost black out, recall for us her recent pregnancy, and the strength she derived from the knowledge gained that day leads Mary Beth to now miraculously manage to keep possession of the child. Mary Beth “wins” by virtue of her suffering; the Sterns suddenly, “unexpectedly,” change their tone and manner, leaving peacefully but, as we discover later, duplicitously going directly to a lawyer.

When the Sterns show up some weeks later with a police order and escort, Betsy is again the source of aggression, adamantly grasping for the child, trying to snatch it from Mary Beth; “give me that baby” she “demanded” (Whitehead 46). Next, audaciously, “Betsy began to instruct the police” (Whitehead 46). Whitehead, in maternal disarray and shock, runs to their car, imploring them not to take the child, upon which plea “Betsy took the side of [Bill’s] face and whipped it around toward her. ‘Don’t look at her, Bill. Don’t look at her’” (Whitehead 48). “As [she] stood there barefoot, in a pink and white nightshirt, with [menstrual] blood all over [her] legs,” Mary Beth unsuccessfully implores Bill to “look at me” before she is handcuffed and thrown in a police car (Whitehead 48). This manic public scene, in view of the neighbors and thematically witnessed (as so much of the events are) by Whitehead’s daughter Tuesday, is shocking in its gruesomeness.¹²⁹ The second of two “fluid” scenes,¹³⁰ Whitehead describes how in her panic over having her baby taken from her, she had “soaked right through the sanitary napkin” (Whitehead 48). Just like the last scene where Betsy attacked Mary Beth, the maternal injury which the Sterns here attempt to inflict on Mary Beth is literalized; “I still hadn’t healed from the baby’s delivery and I felt like an open wound” (Whitehead 49). Despite Mary Beth’s

¹²⁹ Ten-year-old Tuesday witnesses every traumatic moment; she’s there screaming at Bill to help, she later beats the policeman who takes her sister away, her horrified expression is captured in a photograph as she leaves the courtroom. The lesson is not lost on Tuesday (nor on Mary Beth) when Tuesday says, in response to her mother’s statement “someday you’ll have a baby too,” that Tuesday would rather hire someone to bear it for her (Whitehead 95).

¹³⁰ The first describes Whitehead waking at night in “a pool of milk . . . alone in the darkness, with the milk running down my chest and soaking my nightgown. I held out my empty arms and screamed at the top of my lungs, ‘Oh God, what have I done--I want my baby!’” (Whitehead 26-7).

physical display, Betsy--infertile, masculine--cannot read Mary Beth's blood, nor does she allow Bill to attempt to. Whitehead's leaky, messy body, representing everything that is opposite to Betsy's, is familiar as the image of the grief-torn woman, and figures in situating the appropriateness of Whitehead's private life (dying her gray hair, purchasing the wrong gifts) with her public mothering (fleeing to Florida, withdrawing her son from school). If a reader is meant to sympathize with Whitehead, it is clearly not because she manages publicly to represent herself as a "good" woman and mother, but rather because she is so stricken by being a mother--so publicly falling to pieces that it is impossible for anyone to justify keeping her and her child separate.

Discussing surrogacy narratives, E. Ann Kaplan is surprised by the fact that surrogacy narratives so often end acrimoniously,¹³¹ and that both women involved seem to be proceeding naively through most of the process: "neither woman is self-consciously aware of the discursive forces shaping her experience and of how the stories are linked. The [surrogate mother's] violent desire to keep the child may be provoked precisely by the adoptive mother's urgent desire to *claim* the child, evidencing a negative symbiotic process" ("Politics" 122). Struggling to resolve this process, Kaplan suggests we blame media representations of women--the "positions of women fighting women so common in film melodrama and TV soaps" ("Politics" 122) which suggest to women that they become surrogates in the first place by stressing that "the self-sacrificial mother is what mothering is all about" ("Politics" 122). However, the "desire for this self-sacrifice wills into being its opposite binary, the jealous, competitive mother, who wants to possess the

¹³¹ cf. "While the relationship between Mrs. Whitehead and Mr. Stern grew distant, her relationship with Mrs. Stern grew closer. The relationship subsequently deteriorated as Mrs. Stern insisted that Mrs. Whitehead undergo amniocentesis, take a prescription pharmaceutical in order to control the effects of the difference in blood type between Mr. Stern and Mrs. Whitehead and take certain precautions when Mrs. Whitehead reported an elevation in blood pressure in the last months of pregnancy" (Sorkow ***41).

child” (Kaplan, “Politics” 123). Consider again Chief Justice Wilentz’s surprise at the Sorkow decision: “We do not know of, and cannot conceive of, any other case where a perfectly fit mother was expected to surrender her newly born infant, perhaps forever, and was then told she was a bad mother because she did not” (**88). Whitehead’s jealousy and possessiveness brings about her selfsame sense of sacrificial motherhood, just as Whitehead’s narrative in turn calls forth Betsy Stern as the image of the jealous, competitive mother. Mrs. Whitehead claimed during the second trial that her erratic behavior, used against her in the first hearings, were caused by legal and judicial mistakes, and that her response did not indicate her future mothering abilities; Judge Wilentz agrees that “any mother who truly loved her child might so respond and that it is . . . unfair to judge her on the basis of her reaction to an extreme situation rarely faced by any mother” (**22). Whitehead has both to disavow and to justify her erratic behavior in order to be seen as a good mother, while that same behavior also needs to be evidence of the strength of her maternal attachment to her child.

In the “Baby M” case, an argument was made and rejected regarding the contractual obligations of informed consent. It was proposed that informed consent is impossible in the case of pregnancy, that something happens in this period to change a woman, or at least impair her ability to make a truly informed decision.¹³² Sorkow rejects the argument regarding the absence of informed consent in Whitehead’s case because it is both irrelevant (a nonpregnant woman would, no matter what amount of information given, *never* know what it is like to be pregnant) and because Whitehead was at any rate as informed as one could be about any contract involving a “common experience.” He gives the example of marriage contracts or property settlement agreements (Sorkow

¹³² “Stern, her father, claims intent: he *planned* on that child. Whitehead, her mother, claims love: she had *not* planned on loving that child” (Rothman, *Recreating* 138).

***58), neither of which remain in limbo until after the fact, which is in effect what Whitehead seemed to want to happen. On the other hand, Wilentz disagrees with this line of thinking, arguing that “under the contract, the natural mother is irrevocably committed before she knows the strength of her bond with her child. She never makes a totally voluntary, informed decision, for quite clearly any decision prior to the baby’s birth is, in the most important sense, uninformed” (Wilentz ***52). The “most important sense” of the woman “uninformed” prior to pregnancy echoes Whitehead’s own knowledge narrative in A Mother’s Story. Referring to the original report prepared by the Infertility Center suggesting that Whitehead would have difficulty separating from a child, Whitehead says “I now believe that even if Betsy had read the report, I would have remained incomprehensible to her. We were such different kinds of women” (92). Here is another example of A Mother’s Story offering itself as a tale of self-revelation. Humble, ignorant, Mary Beth in retrospect *has* learned a great deal, especially about someone like Betsy Stern. While she may be “incomprehensible” to Betsy, presumably Betsy is comprehensible to Mary Beth. Yet, Whitehead’s understanding of the situation hinges on the efficacy of a report to describe the kind of person she was (or rather, the kind of person Betsy would be able to see her as). She says that she and Mrs. Stern “were” such different people, leaving open the possibility that they at present are not (a suggestion supported by A Mother’s Story’s conception of the Baby M case as one between two similarly competitive women). In the calling forth of their split social selves--two different mothers created in their struggle over one child--Whitehead and Stern become, at least in Whitehead’s mind, compatibly similar. If they “were” such different people, it seems that now Mary Beth, with her new knowledge, has become a bit more like Betsy.

When the truth of Betsy Stern's multiple sclerosis came up at the trial, Whitehead became bitterly convinced that "even her original longing to help an infertile couple had been thwarted" (122). After reading a newspaper article in the Bergen Record which interviewed three doctors, Whitehead came to believe that "as far as anyone could tell, [Betsy] was no more infertile than I was, and . . . there was no medical reason for her not to become pregnant and have her own baby" (122).¹³³ With this, things change for Whitehead, who makes the curious observation that "after that revelation, Bill and Betsy and I seemed to grow farther and farther apart. Separated from each other by a bank of attorneys and a lawyers' table cluttered with legal pads, briefcases, and official-looking documents, Bill and Betsy no longer even looked at me" (123). It is quite surprising, given all that we have witnessed in her text, that Whitehead would only now see the three parties beginning to grow apart. Indeed, it seems as if Whitehead misses the entire point of the last year of custody battles and spectacular courtroom scenes and revelations. Humble (needy?) as ever, Whitehead is affected by the Sterns not looking at her, or not wanting to leave the courtroom at the same time. In what other terms could Whitehead have possibly configured the court battle? What sense does it make to displace the emotions of this case metaphorically onto a table strewn with "official-looking documents"? Whitehead is bothered by Betsy's apparent duplicity, involving as it does a negation of Whitehead's motive for "helping" in the first place. She also appears bothered by the fact that this case is not somehow bringing the families closer together. Finally, she "often thought about how sad it was that we had come to this point. And that all of us were in so much pain. Sometimes I felt as if the whole horrible struggle was crushing my spirit" (Whitehead 123).

¹³³ In 1999, Whitehead spoke to the press about the fact that Stern's MS did in fact get worse, to the point where Betsy now needs to use a wheelchair: "I don't want to be cruel. I feel very sorry for Betsy. But I also feel that what she did was very selfish. I believe disabled people have every right to have children, but living with a disabled parent can create a sense of guilt in a child" (Churcher 38).

So, perhaps (according to Kaplan) Mrs. Stern and Mrs. Whitehead call each other's social being into existence. If so, motherhood, shown in the case to be determined by a relationship with a child, is actually one involving a relationship not to a child but to another mother. Kaplan figures the relationship from both mothers' point of view: "also intriguing in [these] narratives is why [surrogate mothers] do not anticipate the separation from the child, which they ultimately describe as 'heart-wrenching,' or anticipate that they may desire to keep the child despite their having had other children. Why doesn't the adoptive mother anticipate that the [surrogate mother] will have such a struggle?" ("Politics" 122). What could possibly make someone in the 80s think it was acceptable to sell a baby? What could possibly make someone in the 80s think it was acceptable to purchase a baby? And why are people actually surprised when these new arrangements fail to meet some prearranged, theorized outcome? "Hasn't she seen Kramer vs. Kramer [1979]? Doesn't she know the revolution happened?" (Rothman, "Comment" 314).

Chapter Four

Yuppies and Yuckies: Gender and Power in Young Urban Killers

“When Mephistopheles shows up wearing a gold Rolex he’s truly a creature for our age”

(Maslin, “Now, Slyly, Comes the Yuppie Devil” B1)

“Moneyman with a true killer instinct: mergers and acquisitions become murders and executions” (Corliss 78)

The most recognizable object of knowledge in the 80s was the Yuppie. Indeed, the yuppie look was so well-defined in 80s dramas and comedies that he or she appears, almost undifferentiated, in scores of film, television, and print media from the period. Because it is a simple character to get--self-obsessed, pampered, eclectic, snobbish--the yuppie provides an easy foil to saner ways of living. In this role, the yuppie often appeared as a comic trope; in popular television shows like Family Ties (1982-1989) and films like National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation (1989), the yuppie neighbor or family member had comically misdriven ambitions. In Family Ties, Michael J. Fox stole the show by portraying Alex P. Keaton as a tie-wearing young Republican humorously out of step with his hippie parents’ values. In middle-class, everyman comedies like the National Lampoon films (scripted by John Hughes), Chevy Chase and Beverly D’Angelo play characters scorned by their yuppie next-door neighbors, whose perfect lifestyle, indicated by an elaborate stereo system, chic bedroom decor, and jogging routine, is turned upside down by the simple-hearted Griswolds. Played for laughs, these yuppies are ridiculed for their image-obsessions, illustrating to middle-class audiences the frivolity of pretentious aspirations and asking us to sympathize with the frustrated aims of the

everyman. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her study of middle-class life in the 80s, Fear of Falling, points out how yuppies serve as a marker for middle-class anxieties; “they were also the very worst children, the apotheosis of middle-class forebodings about the corrupting effects of affluence” (197).

Nonetheless, elements of so-called “yuppie culture” did begin to appear with more regularity among the middle class in the mid- to late-80s. Even as they were being lampooned, yuppies were figured sensitively and realistically. After yuppie film *avant la lettre* Annie Hall (1977), Lawrence Kasdan’s The Big Chill (1983) was the popular film to best capture the prototypical yuppie coming-of-age narrative.¹³⁴ While satiric representations of yuppies address themselves to an audience identifying with the comic losers trying to make by without leather goods, silk ties, and imported food, a film like The Big Chill is unabashedly a yuppie film made for yuppie consumption. Focusing on a group of former sixties radicals who reunite for a friend’s funeral, Kasdan’s film presents yuppie introspection, guilt, and envy as the eight friends alternately justify and deny their new lifestyles. Instead of pitting the yuppie against the rest of the middle class, these kinds of films pit yuppies against yuppies, showing that yuppies too can have emotion, can experience failure, and can learn life lessons. The kind of group yuppie lifestyle portrayed by The Big Chill was continued in such quintessentially yuppie television shows as Moonlighting (1985-1989), thirtysomething (1987-1991), and L.A. Law (1986-1994). Ehrenreich, in a class analysis, once again points out the contradiction, arguing that the middle class--those most susceptible to the yuppie message--“fancies itself a set of self-determining individuals” rather than a sociological group with shared motives and concerns (238). For the middle-class, there is no shock of recognition with

¹³⁴ The Big Chill, I must note, merely yuppifies the far more complex version of the aging theme explored in John Sayles’s The Return of the Secacus 7 (1980).

these popular portrayals of yuppies; “probably very few people read about yuppies and thought, ‘Oh my god, that’s me!’” (Ehrenreich 238). Nonetheless, as yuppie culture was increasingly disseminated, “many in the middle class could see some part of themselves, some emerging constellation of tastes (for coarse-grain mustard, linen suits, or frequent workouts), and realize that they themselves had been labeled, caricatured, and fingered as part of some larger conformity emanating from beyond their individual will and judgment” (Ehrenreich 238). This tension is particular to the 80s, and as I will show in this chapter is located even more specifically in the few years right after 1984.

In post-90s culture, Yuppies tend more readily towards a mix of the comic and the banal, and today it is about impossible not to partake innocently in what was in the mid-80s a snobbish yuppie pleasure. Even then, though, as imported luxury foods began to fill supermarket aisles, the items that once set the yuppie apart no longer seemed to signify much; “yuppies keep trying to find avenues out of yuppiedom but they end up just starting a new trend that catches up with them,” notes New York Times journalist Maureen Dowd in 1985 (B4). After the easily assimilated dramatic and comedic representations of the yuppie, the yuppie became by the end of the 80s and in the early 90s a stale site of discourse about American mores and values. Yet for me this very staleness identifies the yuppie as a premier object of the knowledge for the 80s; the yuppie’s blandness and search for conformity demonstrates important fractures in the American sense of identity. Ehrenreich illustrates some of the discrepancies between middle-class values and the yuppies as a social group, focusing on class as an important 80s marker of identity. In addition, the yuppie trope avoids the question of gender. Following a demographic or sociological definition, women can be, and are represented as, yuppies, but it is men who strategically occupy the more serious representational roles.

Representations of the yuppie in fact try to be desexed, pointedly sublimating sexual activity to the greater good of activity and personal achievement. Countless jokes reoccur about the yuppie couple scheduling time for sexual intercourse, or turning their beds into second offices. Additionally, initial newspaper articles about the yuppie repeatedly use the nonspecific noun “creature” to describe the yuppie, further desexing it (see below, and my first epigraph). In addition to Ehrenreich’s analysis of class-skipping economic power, we must add an analysis of the yuppie’s degendered relation to power.

What makes the yuppie especially fruitful for these kinds of analysis occurs in the period immediately after its heyday in the mid-80s, when the yuppie was conflated with another American object of knowledge popular in the early 70s and 80s: the serial killer. The two epigraphs which open this chapter highlight this new conflation and summarize the late-80s momentary production of a third, intermediary body whose liminal status exposes the bland yuppie’s true relation to gender and power: the yuppie psycho killer. As a clinical term, “yuppie psycho killer” is useless. While acknowledging the important differences in such criminal and psychological types as serial killers or mass murderers, what I want to look at are not the specifics of actual “Yuppie Killers” (such as Robert Chambers, 1986’s “Preppy Killer”), but rather cultural productions of public, spectacular death. So if I conflate serial killers (like Ted Bundy or Richard Ramírez), mass murderers (like postal killing sprees that first occur in 1986 or 1978’s Jonestown massacre), and assassins (like 1980’s Mark David Chapman or 1981’s John Hinckley, Jr.), it is to address the nature of a public anxiety over public homicide in America. This is a plea for laxity, but as merely subsets of the population, yuppies and killers are uninteresting. As a conflated object of knowledge, however, they can be captured by the imprecise phrase “yuppie psycho killer” to describe the most rabid cultural fears and to demonstrate the

limit point of the yuppie's lifestyle. Suddenly, the yuppie was no longer a humorously maladjusted, but otherwise benign, citizen. In Hollywood films like Blue Steel (1990) and Vampire's Kiss (1989), and novels like American Psycho (1991), he was a homicidal maniac; impeccably groomed on the outside, inside he was ravenous and wounded, psychotic and dangerous. This chapter investigates how and why the yuppie went from being a "subject of history" representing a foolish American lifestyle, to an "object of knowledge" that served as a severe moral warning about the consequences of money, of privilege and social status, and of trust in the image of perfection. Additionally, the asymmetry in the 80s' production of power and gender make the psycho yuppie a compellingly confused site of discourses about gender and power.

I. A Yuppie Past

"You think it's easy trying to keep in step with 30 million individualists?" (Chevat 23)

Michael Kinsley, writing in The New Republic in 1984, begins his explanation of the yuppie by invoking a periodizing comparison with the Fifties. The term "Yuppie," like the "Brat Pack" discussed in Chapter Two, is best initially understood along the lines of this kind of comparison, since both refer explicitly to an earlier generation while simultaneously disavowing this lineage. Claiming that "yuppydom is the 1980s expression of American bourgeois culture," Kinsley gives examples of the two decades' cultural models: "in the 1950s it was the suburban subdivision with two cars in the garage and wife at home raising kids. In the 1980s it's a working couple in the renovated townhouse sharing the child raising with each other and probably outsiders as well" (4). Kinsley means not to suggest that the latter is a true model for American experience, but

rather than yuppydom does describe “a set of trends affecting a significant chunk of the middle class in this predominantly middle-class country” (4). Kinsley’s analysis faces some of the same problems I faced in my discussion of postmodernism in Chapter One, which, like the yuppie, would only in error be applied as a true description of actual American culture. Yet, Kinsley affords the opportunity to point out once again the way that periodizations work off of earlier periodizations at the same time as they exclude explicit knowledge of earlier decades or periods. That is to say, having an understanding of the word “yuppie” both relies on a historical joke or reference at the same time as it catchily operates without any of the necessary knowledge to get the joke.¹³⁵

Perhaps I should explain the humor. The etymology of “yuppie,” which, despite appearing rather authoritatively right around 1984, left room for disagreement about what was being linguistically signaled. The simplest version is that “yuppie” is a diminutive of Y.U.P., an acronym formed by the initial letters of “young urban professional.” The rather demographic-sounding “young urban professional” was marked by cultural commentators as a subset of the Baby Boomers;¹³⁶ the yuppies stuck out from other Boomers because of such 80s contrivances as money market funds, arcane forms of investment banking, and other Wall Street tomfoolery which aided in the creation of an urban *nouveau riche* able to live a publicly lavish life. The term “young urban professional” is meant to help track and explain (and, surely, to exploit) the dramatic surge in this kind of population; but calling someone a “yuppie” obviously entails a further figurative use. As Hendrik Hertzberg suggests, “what we are dealing with here is

¹³⁵ Of course, this may just an example of what Jameson refers to as pastiche--the neutral practice of parody’s mimicry.

¹³⁶ To be clear, Yuppies and Baby Boomers are sometimes used interchangeably, but most consider the latter to be more inclusive. *American Demographics* puts the number of yuppies at 4.2 million, or 5 percent, of Baby Boomers; “while few baby boomers qualify as yuppies, millions of baby boomers are following the trends that the yuppies set” (“The Big Chill [Revisited]” 29). The number of yuppies ranges from 1.5 million to 20 million, depending on who is counting and who counts (Feuer 56). Another appellation, which did not quite stick as it was less catchy, is Tom Wolfe’s “Me Generation” (1976).

something that began as a demographic category with cultural overtones and ended up as a moral category” (101). Similarly, Barbara Ehrenreich notes that “what started out as a neutral demographic category evolved with alarming speed into a social slur” (196), and Fredric Jameson notes how the term “smuggle[s] in a little surplus of concrete social representation along with itself” (*Postmodernism* 407). Part of this process was a public negotiation over the right to be a yuppie and the opposite anger over being so categorized. People wrote letters back and forth, describing how they were or were not a yuppie, or why they were a yuppie but someone else was not. Even in 1984, commentators remarked about the elusiveness of the yuppie; Cheryl Russell, writing in *American Demographics*, humorously remarks that “the funny thing is, no one has ever found a yuppie. Not even the people who look and sound like yuppies will admit to being yuppies” (2). Russell concludes that “the yuppie is a mythological demographic beast” (2). Rising to the defense, Michael Kinsley saw the beastly yuppie as more a creature to be pitied; what he finds “especially unconvincing is the attempt to cast the details of yuppie culture in a Gibbonesque light, as the beginning of the end of America. What, after all, is so terrible about quiche? Are jogging and spinach salad really more decadent than golf and sirloin?” (41). Thousands of such pages of print were devoted to the topic, and so as the “moral category” grew larger and larger, “yuppie” was rendered less precise as a descriptive, and thus more useful as a derogative.

At first, though, the yuppie had a simpler life. Initially, the demographic meaning of the word had a political component.¹³⁷ *The New York Times* first used the word “yuppie” in an 18 March 1984 piece on Gary Hart’s campaign, “Hart Taps a Generation of Young Professionals,” calling them “the newest creature on the political scene this year

¹³⁷ See “1984 Campaign Oratory Is Yielding Few Memorable Terms” for the importance of American politics on the development of the English lexicon, although a senior editor at Merriam-Webster was at the time skeptical that “yuppie” would make the cut.

and one of the most important” (Roberts 26). This short piece quotes a number of “yuppies” (Roberts uses quotations for “yuppie” throughout), who identify themselves with Hart’s campaign primarily because he appeals to the “Me Generation” attitude expressed by one “yuppie,” who explained that “people don’t want to take on the titles [like Democrat or Republican] others have . . . and being independent sounds a lot cooler” (Roberts 26). “If there is one word to describe more ‘yuppies’ it is ‘independent,’” says Roberts, noting that many “yuppies” “grew up in traditional communities with traditional ideas, but severed their roots when they went off to college” (26). In Roberts’ piece, “yuppies” seem to be Democrats in spirit (one says “my primary interest is defeating Reagan” [Roberts 26]) but just not, for some strange reason, in name. Clearly, the idea of a political affiliation based on the “coolness” of the party’s name is disheartening, but the cultural force of “cool” rhymes with the “severed,” “independent” identity that young Baby Boomers sought to establish for themselves in an effort to distinguish themselves both from their parents as well as their large number of peers.

So the yuppie label, at first denoting a new political group, still did not have a coherent politics behind it, just a vaguely contrarian attitude. While it may, in its first uses, seem to have represented a Democratic bloc in practice (at least as far as Hart’s abortive campaign went), uses of the term yuppie continued to be so avowedly ambivalent about specific political affiliations that they began to be sinister. Brett Duval Fromson, writing in the 2 October 1984 New York Times in a piece titled “Reaganomics’s Lure for the Yuppies,” is downright cynical about himself and his peers. On the one hand, he writes, “we viewed the recession as medicine necessary to relieve the ills of stagflation caught during the Carter administration. . . . Most of us assumed we would make it on our own even during a recession--and didn’t give much thought to those

who wouldn't" (Fromson A31). On the other hand, though, the yuppies have not been "drawn to the Republicans' ideological appeals. . . . We are no more or less conservative than the young of the 1960s and early 1970s" (Fromson A31). Explaining the ambivalence shown towards both parties, Fromson suggests that yuppies are "essentially pre-ideological. . . . Most of us slosh soupily in the middle of the ideological spectrum without giving it much thought" (A31). With his brutal, selfish tone, it is hard to tell how serious Fromson is being or how much or how little thought he has given the matter; while he seems to agree with other journalists that yuppies are issue-oriented, and not prone to empty-headed political affiliations, what exactly he means by calling them "pre-ideological" is hard to say. He ends his piece with the "lure" of the title--"Yuppies, if we do anything at all, respect those who deliver the goods. How else are we going to afford our Ferragamo pumps, Brooks Brothers suits, country houses, European cars and California chardonnays?" (Fromson A31). Needless to say, these final remarks brought fire from other indignant "young urban professionals," who objected that not all of them were "chardonnay-sipping elitists" (see Jacobson and Nelson). But perhaps this disgustingly simple "crass materialism" is just what Fromson meant by pre-ideological: for the yuppies, no thoughtful politics, just the goods plain and simple?

"Reaganomics's lure" of delivering "the goods" to the yuppies proved itself to be a lure for both political parties. Whether it was true or not (and, since Hart's campaign tanked, how could it have been?), the yuppie was the new "political creature" to be termed or courted.¹³⁸ After Reagan won the 1980 presidential election, political analysts Gordon Rayfield and Julian Baim offered the same "warning to the Republicans" as "advice to the Democrats": "don't take yuppies for granted." Repeating a familiar theme,

¹³⁸ It is a mark of early journalist's uncertainty that the word "creature" was often quizzically used to describe the yuppie and the yuppie's desire (e.g., Will C7 and Roberts 26).

they saw the election, with its many yuppie “Reagan Democrats,” as “having thus demonstrated our independence” (Rayfield and Baim A31). This libertarian “independence” from “ideological prescription” is the overriding quality that the early politically-defined yuppies felt that they shared. Sociologist John L. Hammond agrees with this assessment, but for very different reasons. Analyzing the media claim that yuppies are paradoxically more conservative on economic issues (“social spending and government responsibility for economic welfare”) but more liberal on social “lifestyle” issues (“broadly, sexual and gender liberation”), Hammond debunks the myth that yuppies constitute a new, independently conservative social group which suddenly appeared overnight: “yuppies are as liberal, or more so, as the rest of the population on both lifestyle and economic issues” (488).¹³⁹ Seeking to explain the yuppies’ conservative reputation, Hammond focuses on their conspicuous consumption and visible presence in the public eye. For one, there was a noticeable lack of radical politics in the 80s, compared to the 60s and 70s. Furthermore, yuppies, by sheer numbers, “visibly transformed the American cityscape with health clubs, gourmet delis and remodeled houses” (Hammond 497).¹⁴⁰ For this reason more than any, Hammond argues, yuppies became a marketing target (for advertising and politics) and thus media outlets catered to them, supported them, and wrote about them. Hammond sees the yuppie story as the very paradigm of journalistic models--“the arrival of the yuppies qualified as an event; it could be dramatized and visualized” (498). A Time magazine piece later shows how “the

¹³⁹ This at the end of 1986; in the same issue of The Public Opinion Quarterly, Michael Delli Carpini and Lee Sigelman reach the same findings. Using more detailed research and sophisticated regression analyses, they find that the “political distinctiveness” of yuppies is “less a matter of demographic characteristics, than . . . of a state of mind or a lifestyle” (517). There appears not to be “some unique political profile that results from the combination of being young, urban, and professional [but rather that] yuppies are more liberal than the rest of the population because they are young, and young people are generally more liberal; because they are urban, and urbanites are generally more liberal; and because they are professional, and professionals are, on balance and in recent times, more liberal” (Carpini and Sigelman 515-6).

¹⁴⁰ “Yuppie culture is responsible for the popularity of the new American cuisine, the elevated status of pasta and the proliferation of raspberry vinegar” (Piesman and Hartley 16).

fascination with charting the tastes of this subgroup was easily explainable: ‘Yuppies live in the fashionable neighborhoods of large urban areas. . . . That’s also precisely where editors and TV producers live’” (W. Shapiro 65). If the yuppies appeared to be more conservative politically, then it was because the whole country was becoming more conservative; yuppies simply did so more noticeably.¹⁴¹ Finally, Hammond concludes that “the rapid spread of the yuppie story [in the media] and its equally rapid disappearance are themselves grounds for suspecting that its diffusion was due to a social process rather than a process of verification” (498). In other words, “no social group adopts, or abandons, a common culture overnight” (Hammond 498). The fact that they appeared to do so, however, suggests a strange rapidity to the nature of this social process, explained by Jane Feuer as a “marketing icon” that “seized the imagination” (14). Indeed, Feuer, referencing Linda Hutcheon’s theory of postmodern art as engaging a “complicitous critique,” finds it plausible that “the whole tone of yuppie culture was self-mocking,” and that an “unselfconscious yuppie was truly a media myth created by yuppie journalists” (Feuer 50-1). Yuppies who knew they were yuppies were unable to admit it, and instead ridiculed other yuppies for their shared values.

But while politicians, pollsters, and media pundits were quick to identify their target audience, they moved too quickly to align yuppies with politics. Particularly thorny for some was the “u” in yuppies. A few initially read it not as “urban” but as “upwardly-mobile,” an etymology that led to the competing phrase “Yumpies,” for “young upwardly-mobile professionals.” As conceived by the media, which of these two features--urban or upwardly-mobile--was more important to the authentic yuppie lifestyle? In the same New York Times issue that had that paper’s first use of the word

¹⁴¹ A related explanation is that the yuppies’ conspicuous consumption of “pricey comestibles . . . are affordable luxuries [which] serve as consolation for the lack of unaffordable luxuries like a large house” (Kinsley 41).

“yuppie” (18 March 1984), an editorial discusses the “small peripheral fight [that] has bubbled up over a name” (“Big Chillers” E20). Some synonyms suggested are “the brief-and-chablis set,” “the Big Chill generation,” “the Y.P.’s,” “Yumpies,” and “Yumpys” (too much like “lumpy”),¹⁴² before the author finally votes for “Yuppies, with its apt echo of hippies and Yippies, labels that some of them once embraced” (“Big Chillers” E20).¹⁴³ Clearly, this semiserious “small peripheral fight” has nothing to do with the qualifications for being a member of this set, but rather with the right to label this group. The social process rarely seems to be as suggestive as it is about “the big chillers,” and the media’s satisfaction with choosing among all these potential lifestyle labels is mock-epic.

But even in this editor’s vote for “Yuppies” is a serious reference to the “apt echo” of the 60s. In the following week’s New York Times, the editorial “The Year of the Yuppies” disagrees, arguing that “to think of today’s Yuppies as politically akin to yesterday’s hippies is as to be mistaken now as Charles Reich was then,” referring to the author of The Greening of America, who spoke promisingly, but incorrectly, of a coming youthful revolution in man’s relationship to himself and his environment (E20). The author of “The Year of the Yuppies” saw a different relationship between the potential political power of the yuppies and radical 60s politics. Yuppies “possess atypical affluence and influence: These are the people who created the counterculture,” and thus seem by rights to now also have the privilege to recreate it as mainstream culture (“The Year of the Yuppies” E20). “The Year of the Yuppies,” like the other articles, tries to

¹⁴² Furthermore, unlike “Yumpy,” “Yumpie” “ends with the word ‘pie,’ thus suggesting the young, upwardly mobile professional’s life is a piece of pie, a piece of cake, or a bowl of cherries, or something,” writes Russell Baker (A31) in the 12 September 1984 New York Times.

¹⁴³ The matter was raised again, with a smaller field, in the 28 June 1984 New York Times: “what’s the right term for all those post-1945 baby-boom voters: yuppies or yumpies?” (“Hippies, Yippies, Yuppies” A26). The editor decides “There’s no music in yumpies. It’s lumpy, even wimpy. Yuppies, by contrast, captures something of the hippies who peopled ‘Hair’ and the yippies who tossed dollar bills down onto the New York Stock Exchange” (“Hippies, Yippies, Yuppies” A26). Other suggestions: “Y.P., Yo-Pro, Young Elite and Valley Crowd” (“Onward and Yupward” 47).

represent the Yuppie as politically *sui generis*. Their levelheaded, rootless independence is hence only established by disavowing their radical past (which is the point of *The Big Chill*), and many did so strenuously, arguing not only against labels like Democrat or Republican, but also against any “apt echoes” of hippies and Yippies. In response to this article, which along with a William Safire piece of 25 March 1984 (on “Yip, Yap, Yumpies”) more or less legitimated the New York Time’s use, without quotes, of yuppie, readers responded: “I can understand your fascination with the emergence of a new political generation. Moreover, as with most stereotypes, there may be some truth to this one. Even so, the ‘yuppie’ label is offensive and patronizing” (Holtzman E20). The letter continues, “our views--once rejected as too radical--can now be rejected as a product of our culture” (Holtzman E20).¹⁴⁴ This author highlights the similarity between Yippies and Yuppies by finding common ground, the “apt echo,” in society’s shared rejection of them; there is no contradiction between the Yuppie and Yippie’s political life, rather they are identical in that both are excluded.

The etymological niceties in the similarities between hippie, Yippie, and Yuppie are compelling,¹⁴⁵ and suggest an alternate origin story for the yuppies. Are the yuppies simply Yippies who have gotten haircuts and jobs and gone straight? And what exactly could a yippie--> yuppie etymology really signify, besides an evolutionary connection? While at once a way of dismissing Yuppies as being just like those crazy Yippies, this etymology also has the opposite effect of politically resuscitating the Yuppie: they’re not all evil Reaganites opposed to liberal values, they’re just modern, savvy radicals, as Bret

¹⁴⁴ In another context, Louis Menand pointedly illustrates the back-and-forth between politics and class in the eighties, calling Critical Legal Studies “radicalism for yuppies,” which is “a style of radical politics that doesn’t require giving up” “a rather desirable set of occupational conditions” (259).

¹⁴⁵ And again, like the term Brat Pack, we have specific antecedents in the 60s, a decade very much in the mind of the 80s. And is it really possible, as a 1985 U.S. News & World Report article suggests, that the word “hippies” also has acronymic roots: “hippies got their name from a San Francisco political organization known as H.I.P. (Haight-Ashbury Independent Proprietors)” (Golden 63)?

Easton Ellis indicates when he writes that “this generation, it seems, wants to be Wall Street’s Gordon Gekko with the conscience of Abbie Hoffman” (“Twentysomethings” B1). Confusing this relationship between Yuppies and Yippies is a series of debates in 1985 between Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. Hoffman, representing his “Youth International Party” of the 60s, debated his former Yippie cofounder Rubin, who argued that Yuppie values need not be seen as conservative or neo-revolutionary. One popular portrayal of Rubin saw him as personifying the shift between the 60s and the 80s, with the once-politicized hippies now coming back into the system in order to use it to their own ends. Not everyone bought Rubin’s argument; Barbara Ehrenreich puts it plainly: “it was possible in fact to have been a radical in the first decade and a self-centered hustler in the second, as Jerry Rubin’s transformation from rebel to networking impresario illustrates” (198).

When later lexicologists revisited the question of the yuppie’s origins, focusing not on Hart’s campaign but on Rubin, they reinforced the linguistic (and thematic) connections between Yippies and Yuppies. Fred R. Shapiro, who discusses computer-assisted lexicology and how electronic databases allow researchers to find antedatings in order to expand etymologies, uses the word “yuppie” as his example. He begins with the first reported citation by Chicago Tribune columnist Bob Greene, who used the term yuppie in a 23 March 1983 column about “Yippie-turned-Yuppie” Jerry Rubin; Greene says he heard the word from “one social commentator.” Others suggested that actually the phrase came “from somebody Greene ran into at a bar” (Adler 16).¹⁴⁶ Greene’s piece, “Jerry Rubin’s New Business is Business,” is usually cited as the first print appearance of the word yuppie, and Shapiro argues that 1984’s The Yuppie Handbook “appears to

¹⁴⁶ Greene responded in his column (30 December 1984: 2) that he could not remember exactly who he heard it from, making an (unsuccessful) public plea for that person to contact him.

have independently coined it using different analogies” (“Yuppies” 140) (although theirs is the OED’s first entry). He adds further that “Greene’s social commentator [the person he ran into at a bar] and Piesman and Hartley [coauthors of The Yuppie Handbook] were probably not the only independent coiners of *yuppie*” (Shapiro, “Yuppies” 140). Shapiro then gives an earlier citation for “yuppie”--17 September 1983--and even earlier citations for the parent phrase “young urban professional”--19 February 1979.¹⁴⁷

Following the theory that yuppies must have derived or mutated from some earlier group, another candidate for how the yuppie got its name (and image) is the preppy. In “The Short Happy Life of the American Yuppie,” Hendrik Hertzberg outlines this second derivation, focusing not on the disjunct in the political life of the yuppie-hippie dialectic, but rather the economic and class distinctions between yuppies and preppies. Hertzberg comes up with the joking “pseudo-social science formula” “y = h + p” to explain the yuppies’ “democratic realm.” Yuppies and preppies share the same outward appearances and interests, but preppies have an exclusive “aristocracy of birth, a bastion of hereditary privilege” (Hertzberg 103). This, of course, further explains the touted yuppie “independence” from their parents’ past, and imagining the yuppie’s exclusion from the true state of preppy grace goes some way towards explaining their later, stereotypically self-interested behavior; the yuppies’ is a climb to mimic preppydom that cannot be completed.

Hertzberg gets much of his material from the inaugural text of what was labeled, ad nauseam, “The Year of the Yuppie.”¹⁴⁸ Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley’s The

¹⁴⁷ Since then, even earlier datings have been found--I believe 13 May 1981 (R.C. Longworth’s “Chicago: City on the Brink” in the Chicago Tribune) is now the first print use of “yuppie,” although, as Shapiro suggests, the multiple, simultaneous coinings indicate that yuppie was initially used in oral communication. See Shapiro’s piece for a thorough dating of the various early citations. Sorting through these initial citations, Shapiro finds that “the Yippie derivation received scant mention until late 1984” when the “Yippie vs. Yuppie” debates occurred.

¹⁴⁸ Before the 1984 Newsweek New Year’s Eve piece was a 25 March headline, “Year of the Yuppies.”

Yuppie Handbook: The State-of-the-Art Manual for Young Urban Professionals, published in January of 1984, was a best-selling knockoff of Lisa Birnbach's The Official Preppy Handbook (1980). Discussing the "Year of the Yuppie," a 31 December 1984 Newsweek special report suggests "it was the year, also, in which all these people finally learned who they were" (Adler 14). Impatient with the past, they had to wait until 1984 to have a name for themselves, and as critic Jane Feuer points out in Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism, "George Orwell was wrong: 1984 would come to represent an orgy . . . of consumerism," since it "was also the year of Reagan's reelection, of Diana Vreeland's Yves Saint Laurent retrospective at the Met, of the rise of Dynasty to the top of the TV charts, [and] of Miami Vice" (14). What is interesting is how The Yuppie Handbook, with only one or two possible prior print citations, was able to get the yuppie lifestyle so dead on a full year earlier. From that initial public appearance, though, Yuppies were clearly a joke. The Yuppie Handbook, published by a division of Simon & Schuster,¹⁴⁹ portrays on its front cover a couple, drawn in the style of a visual dictionary or foreign language textbook, with lines and captions pointing to such accessories as Cross Pen, Cartier Tank Watch, Squash Racquet, Co-op Offering Prospectus, Burberry Trench Coat, and Fresh Pasta. Inside are chapters testing "Your Yuppie I.Q.," defining "Yupification," suggesting which dog to get (an Akita--"State of the Arf"), and explaining "Mail Order Mania." The "handbook" is illustrated throughout with diagrams and drawings, and the short chapters are mostly bulleted or boxed lists of things to do or not do in order to be or to identify a yuppie. The authors' strategy is to

¹⁴⁹ With a mail-off ad in the back for other humor titles such as Real Women Don't Pump Gas, The Complete Air Guitar Handbook, and The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Feuer, by reprinting the drawn cover of The Yuppie Handbook and a photograph from the Newsweek special, points out that the later Newsweek photograph is "uncanny because [it] exactly duplicate[s] the cartoon figures on the cover of The Yuppie Handbook" (49). See especially 43-51 for a discussion of the yuppie's "jocular" "self-distancing" and how it relates to Feuer's avoidance of a "unidirectional causal relationship between politics and television" (1), which Todd Gitlin also emphasizes (see Chapter One).

take the yuppie mock-seriously, and so they detail all aspects of the yuppie lifestyle--eating habits, relationships, car buying, apparel, religion, hobbies.

The Yuppie Handbook's first section--"Beyond the Preppies"--emphasizes that derivation, and makes clear that, unlike those forebears, yuppies inhabit a style of living as opposed to a way of living: "like all caricature it is based on exaggeration of fact" (Will C7). By this I mean that yuppies do do all of the same things that non-yuppies do--have jobs, go to restaurants, work for a living, throw barbecues, own pets, go to the movies, do drugs--they just do these things differently (as in The Big Chill). For this reason, the yuppie lifestyle is so easy to parody: "Michael and Jennifer drink their coffee while donning their respective single-vented navy blue suits. Jennifer puts on Adidas over her stockings and tucks her pumps into her briefcase. Michael wears his wingtips" (Piesman and Hartley 77). "When they're pressed for time, they frequent the local gourmet take-out store, buying expensive, esoteric versions of chicken salad" (Piesman and Hartley 16). This way of life, not so much different as skewed (it is not ascetic or indulgent, not decadent or modern--rather just expensive and eclectic), overwhelmed earlier images of yuppies as "political creatures" or reformed Yuppies.

Not everyone found the joke funny; Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the very frivolity of yuppies--and hence of the very *subject* of yuppies--was a distraction from the deeper changes their appearance signaled. In the eighties, the class contours of American society were undergoing a seismic shift. The extremes of wealth and poverty moved further apart. (200)

The yuppies' apparent insouciance in light of economic and social change, and the media's humorous cultivation of this frivolity (cf. Chevat's "Gelato Was My Armageddon"), began to bring about some of the worst "cultural overtones" about

Yuppies. The 28 June 1985 New York Times notes a “new ‘hostility’ attached to the word” (Dowd B1), and (while I was not able to find the first use for it) the phrase “Die Yuppie Scum” intaglioed its way across cities. Ehrenreich explains that since one segment of the middle class “seemed to have a clear strategy for success” and “because that strategy involved such a betrayal of traditional middle-class values . . . the media [may have] turned so quickly against those who followed” the yuppie lifestyle (200). While it was argued that the supposed backlash against the yuppie “will lead to more social concern” (Dowd B4),¹⁵⁰ as Lee Eisenberg, the editor-in-chief of Esquire put it, by “the summer of ’87--it had become all too plain that America’s favorite cartoon character was ready to take his place on the endangered-species list. Nobody, but nobody, liked the Y-word anymore, for it had grown tired and meaningless from its virulent overuse” (15). What we are left with from the “short life, untimely death, and general inaccuracy of the media’s image of the yuppie” (Hammond 497) is an unanchored object of knowledge, signifying diverse and contradictory aims.

In summary, we have three types of yuppies: an independent political group to be won (or tamed, as the “creature” metaphor indicates), a demographic category falsely seen as representing a specific set of social or cultural beliefs (which much of the rest of the middle class disliked), and a humorously exaggerated, often vilified, cartoon stereotype of a post-recession, worldly 25- to 39-year-old. There is, as I remarked earlier, one other 80s yuppie image that only developed at the end of the decade and in response to the yuppie backlash: the yuppie psycho. Just as the Yuppie and the Brat Pack refer back to 60s notions of subject types, so does the term “psycho” recall Hitchcock’s famous 1960 film. But the yuppie psycho shares only certain features with Tony Perkins’s portrayal

¹⁵⁰ Hartley, coauthor of The Yuppie Handbook, explicitly points to yuppies’ children, who supposedly “will have a humanizing effect” on their yuppie parents (Dowd B4).

of reclusive, mommy-obsessed Norman Bates. Between Hitchcock's film and later versions of the psycho figure is an American subhistory of violence and murder, a continued development of what Mark Seltzer calls America's "wound culture." Seltzer's Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture presents an argument about serial killing which links a focus on graphomania, "deindividualized individuality," and the crossings of bodies and histories along the public/private divide. While beginning with such figures as Jack the Ripper and other notorious turn-of-the-century murderers, Seltzer spends most of his time on what we have only recently come to call "serial killers," a term first coined in the mid-70s by the FBI, who were in the early 80s beginning to become as well known as their quarry (16). After a 1983 Senate hearing, "Serial Murders: Hearing on Patterns of Murders Committed by One Person, in Large Numbers with No Apparent Rhyme, Reason, or Motivation," and a 1984 HBO special Murder: No Apparent Motive, quite a number of nonfiction books were produced on serial killers in the 80s (Tim Cahill's Buried Dreams: Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer [1986, on John Wayne Gacy], Joel Norris's Serial Killers: The Growing Menace [1988], Ann Rule's The Stranger Beside Me [1989, on Ted Bundy], and Elliott Leyton's Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer [1984]), including historian Philip Jenkins's Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide, which argued that "in the 1980s, serial murder came to symbolize the worst manifestations of human behavior" (qtd. in Seltzer 150). The initial, conflicting representations of the yuppie stand in counterpoint to the isolated, invisible, "everyman and no man" serial killer of the 80s, and so the yuppie psycho killer represents a curiously unassimilable amalgamation of those features of the yuppie which are obscured or covered over by jokes and dismissive statements about the yuppie's homogeneity, blandness, and self-

interestedness. In the psycho yuppie, the unexpressed qualities lying under the yuppie's façade are shown to be disassimilated--unsuccessfully contained within and by the association of these two types.

It is a mark of the further disassimilation of the yuppie and the serial killer tropes that as recently as 2000, when Mary Harron directed American Psycho, based on Bret Easton Ellis's "controversial" novel, the film's reception showed clearly the way that the yuppie serial killer was still an object of criticism and anxiety. That is, whatever was disturbing about a yuppie killer in the 80s is still so today, even though Harron's film was clearly an anomalous period piece, not representing the kind of movie villains typical of late 90s and 2000 cinema.¹⁵¹ Harron's American Psycho was boycotted, protested, and attacked in the same manner that the book it was based on was, and this suggests that while the yuppie psycho figure emerged briefly in 1989-1991, these representations unsuccessfully resolved whatever it was about the yuppie psycho that was so bothersome in the first place. Could it be, as Pagan Kennedy points out about Ellis's American Psycho ("a Frankenstein monster of a book"), that "just as in the horror flicks, the mob, armed with pitchforks and torches, is chasing down the beast . . . rather than its true creator" (428)? It is with this question in mind, that I want to look more specifically at the fate of the yuppie after the media attention of 1984 died off and a backlash set in. There was already a renewed interest in the serial murderer or killer in the late 80s and early 90s. Public shootings--Reagan (1981), Pope John Paul II (1981), and John Lennon (1980)--began the decade, and the images of their shootists were later assimilated into

¹⁵¹ If anything about the film was timely it was the way it addressed, by means of a very simple reading, the evil born of rampant consumerism and a capitalist-centered existence, a topic certainly present during Reagan's presidency as well as Bush II's. Peter Bowen, in an interview with Harron, suggests that "its mix of identity crisis and abrupt violence seem oddly more in tune with the tenor of our times" and that "its fable of a fractured identity in a post-capitalist, hyper-mediated world seems now a mirror of our culture rather than a warning about it" (1).

fiction and film by the figure of the psychopathic, serial killer.¹⁵² Thomas Harris's Red Dragon, written in 1981, was successfully filmed by Michael Mann as Manhunter in 1986, and Harris's The Silence of the Lambs, written in 1988, was filmed by Jonathan Demme in 1991, winning multiple Oscars. Such novels as Ira Levin's Sliver (1991) (Levin best known for Rosemary's Baby), Paul Theroux's Chicago Loop (1990), Lew McCreary's Minus Man (1991), Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian (1985), Dennis Cooper's Frisk (1991), and Andrea Dworkin's Mercy (1991), feature at their core graphic murder and dismemberment, sexual and serial violence. Dworkin is an interesting case in point of the popularity of these fictions for both men and women, New York Times journalist Edwin McDowell quizzically discusses "the acceptance of such novels by many women" (D8). Court cases like Richard Chambers ("The Preppie Killer," 1986), and the executions of notorious figures like Ted Bundy (1989) focused public attention on the gruesome, horrific deaths of what Time magazine labeled in 1983 "a new breed of killer" (Stanley 47), literally expressed in 1991 with the introduction and popularity of the cable network Court TV, and embodied by cultural villain-heroes such as Freddy Krueger, who made his way from horror cinema to syndicated television and toy store shelves during the "media-borne 'serial killer panic of 1983 to 1985'" (Seltzer 65).

There are many yuppie films in the 80s, and many of these feature young urban social climbers getting themselves into trouble, but only in a few do these Yuppie characters cross the line and act as evil Yuckies--Young Urban Killers. What I will examine in the following sections is the overlapping of the two larger public fascinations traced here: the yuppie and the psycho killer. In particular, two very confused films,

¹⁵² Again, there is a difference between serial killers, mass murderers, psychopaths, sociopaths, cannibals, exhibitionists, child molesters, rapists, assassins, and religious nuts. However, mainstream cinema, television, and fiction rarely, if ever, makes such distinctions. On this point, see Elizabeth Young's excellent "The Silence of the Lambs and the Flaying of Feminist Theory."

Kathryn Bigelow's Blue Steel (1990) and Robert Bierman's Vampire's Kiss (1989), offer prototypical treatments of this dialectic, which is later fully realized in Bret Easton Ellis's novel American Psycho (1991). I would be remiss here to not mention in passing Adrian Lyne's Fatal Attraction (1987), a very prototypical yuppie film with a female slasher, although one that is hopelessly caught up in itself and its regressive sexual politics. Fatal Attraction (and, to a lesser extent, Paul Verhoeven's Basic Instinct [1992]) stands apart from the yuppie killer films I will discuss because it unproblematically accepts the yuppie trope in the same way as, say, The Big Chill does. While Fatal Attraction criticizes Michael Douglas's character for his yuppie sense of entitlement and privilege, ultimately the viewer is forcefully required to identify wholly with him against the "crazy bitch" who has invaded the home (in this light, Fatal Attraction can be read as a yuppified update of Clint Eastwood's 1971 Play Misty for Me). Against this version of yuppie death, the three texts I will discuss each introduce a blurred set of discourses; what would otherwise be a conventional cop thriller, vampire film, or slasher novel is instead contaminated by the newly-villainized yuppie. The result is an uncertain critique of the "asymmetrical social relation between gender and power" (the phrase is Elizabeth Young's), where the yuppie's privileged power status fits uneasily against mainstream cinema's insistence that slasher and horror plots feature destabilized, paradoxical gender relations.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ See, for example, Carol Clover, who takes up the question of sadism and masochism as it relates to a putatively adolescent male audience's enjoyment of plots revolving around the destruction of a voyeuristic male villain at the hands of a Final Girl. Additionally, this is the one thematic element which is carried over from the 60s version of the psycho.

II. American Psycho: Yuppie Phantoms

“No introduction necessary.” “Killer looks.” (movie taglines for American Psycho)

Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (1991) is the most coherent and well-known example of the yuppie psycho killer, and has already been critically discussed (and defended) at great length. Rather than provide my own reading of the novel here, I want instead to focus on some of the reception and defense of the novel in order to indicate the ways in which the novel was perceived as breaking new ground in its juxtaposition of yuppie culture and misanthropic gruesomeness. Much of the initial response to the novel was sensationalist,¹⁵⁴ and entirely a product of its first publisher Simon & Schuster’s dropping of the novel three months prior to publication, which led to censure from groups like the National Organization of Women, but complaints of censorship from the Authors Guild and the American Civil Liberties Union. The subject matter of the novel, centering around the inner life of yuppie Patrick Bateman, whose multiple, ritualistic murders are described in extremely vivid details, tended to overwhelm the novel’s style in the mind of early reviewers. Simply put, many could not get past what happens, and failed to take into account the novel’s flat, distanced tone. If one is to approach the novel at all, one needs to be willing to consider the satiric or parodic implications of the yuppie style, which in its quest to be the best focuses more minutely on tiny, superficial distinctions (which shade of ivory is best for a business card? Which precise pinstripe width exudes the more power?) than other social groups would. Again, as Jane Feuer puts it, “the whole tone of yuppie culture was self-mocking,” and so one reply to the novel’s attitude towards its own horrors is, “what did you expect?”

¹⁵⁴ See especially Roger Rosenblatt’s hysterical review “Snuff this Book!” and Richard Bernstein’s more temperate response.

Some reviewers were able to connect the novel's jarring scenes of murder and cannibalism with the novel's boring period details and thorough description of its yuppie's world, finding a metaphor in Bateman for the kind of conspicuous consumption and extremely selfish hedonism epitomized by the Reagan 80s. This part is easy to get, and provides the most common reading of the yuppie psycho. But while accepting the value of the metaphoric implications of cannibalism in American Psycho, I want to move further into the other themes produced in mixing these two objects of knowledge--yuppies and serial killers--to see how and why violence was only later added to the yuppie image, without simply saying that America got tired of Reaganomics's lure (that reading oversimplifying the novel's relationship to its period, suggesting that Reaganism "caused" yuppie psychosis or depictions of it, without considering the ways in which the field of "the Reagan 80s" was also in turn constructed by such depictions).

Critics Linda S. Kauffman, James Gardner, and Ruth Helyer represent three distinct readings of Ellis's text that move beyond shocked initial reactions to the novel's conflation of yuppie culture and serial murder and try to address the form that this conflation takes. Kauffman finds the metaphoric relation between yuppies and psychos to be simultaneously based on newly alienating urban forms. Gardner on the other hand suggests that one leads to the other. Finally, Helyer finds yuppies and psychos as two distinct warring impulses in 80s America, each fighting for the upper hand. Each seems to me also to address the novel's series of misidentifications, where characters continuously misrecognize other characters, calling each other by different names or even answering to someone else's name; in fact, Bateman at one point exploits this confusion, assuming another person's identity in order to murder a man, only later to begin to believe that he may have unwittingly murdered someone else. Initial readers' misidentifications of the

novel's tonal and thematic elements are replicated by the novel's characters misidentifying each other and themselves.

Kauffman, discussing Harron's film version, refers back to her reading of the novel, in which the cannibalism in particular (an element only alluded to in the film), serves as "a metaphor for the conspicuous consumption of Ronald Reagan's America in the 1980s" (41). Kauffman herself unwittingly extends the metaphor; as she discusses the film's credit sequence, which takes place in a restaurant, she declares that "consumption is a portmanteau pun; it signals the excesses of crass materialism and simultaneously transforms 'good taste' literally into a matter of life or death" (43). Kauffman's focus on the visual elements of consumption leads her to compare Ellis's novel to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, calling *American Psycho* "another tale about self-fashioning in a gilded age of greed" (41).¹⁵⁵ It is this "gilded age of greed," represented most clearly in both tales by a *nouveau riche* urban environment, which produces "the convergence of consumerism and psychosis" (Kauffman 41) that is figured by the yuppie psycho; the two together seem to be less a product of their individual components and more a conjoined twin of the (post)modern age.

Against this reading is Gardner, who in reviewing Ellis's text finds that "it is a main conceit of the novel to suggest that yuppie-dom, with its arrogant egomania, is one step on the way to serial murder" (56). Gardner is not entirely persuaded by Ellis on this point, and he finds fault with the author's need to "attribute to [his] private preoccupations a larger social message, which is really only window dressing" (57). Nonetheless, by suggesting a causal link between yuppie-dom and serial murder, Gardner echoes what one character says at the beginning of *American Psycho*:

¹⁵⁵ As suggested in an earlier chapter, the 1920s, Fitzgerald especially, seemed especially relevant to describe the 80s.

There's this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who is infected then you can also catch anything, whether it's a virus per se or not--Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, hemophilia, leukemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes. (Ellis 5)

This is an example of the *sine qua non* of the yuppie's anxiety over contagion, which works against Gardner's separation of "private preoccupations" from "larger social concerns." To have a yuppie imagine that he can "catch" dyslexia from someone suggests that the yuppie has a more general worry about the boundaries between the private and the public (or the powerful and the impotent); the yuppie simply cannot separate the two that easily, for it is a boundary under constant threat from the virus of the middle-class, or "the fear of falling," in Ehrenreich's terms. As Gardner reads Ellis, the yuppie's "arrogant egomania" likewise predisposes him to in turn "catch" the serial killer lifestyle, to become infected by that other social trope.

Finally is Helyer, who bases her reading of Ellis's novel on its similarities to and differences from the gothic novel. She reads a character like Patrick Bateman as a Jekyll and Hyde figure gone wrong. For example, when Bateman later goes to Paul Owen's apartment (whom he has killed some time ago), he finds a real estate agent there who turns him away. A confused Bateman "comes away from Owen's flat knowing that he must increasingly imitate himself. Such self-parody is symptomatic of boundary fluctuation" (Helyer 729). Helyer sees Bateman's fluid boundaries as central to his inability to be himself and not "the other"; he is especially "horrified by the threat of feminization" (Helyer 739). As in the two films I will next discuss, the threat of feminization seems to be the key point here for the yuppie psycho's disassimilation.

Setting aside a causal relationship between yuppiedom and psychosis (which would not do justice to either trope's popularity in the public imagination), Helyer suggests that the complexity of the yuppie psycho stems from his contrary, uneven negotiation of power and gender. If we can trust what the author says of his text, we would find Ellis agreeing, claiming in an interview that the book "does in some way reflect my outlook on what the Eighties seemed to symbolize for me. It's very basic. The Eighties seemed to me to be a very ugly decade, and this was what I came away with. And it's an ugly book" (Interview 49). The ugliness of American Psycho, I would argue, is a product of the incommensurability of the yuppie and psycho killer tropes, both of which take under themselves distinctly confused attitudes towards gender and power. Throughout, then, is the question of this reality; Jane Feuer says that the yuppie, like Reagan, "was a nonexistent phantom figure whose effect as image was nevertheless real" (49). Likewise, Patrick Bateman in Ellis's novel realizes at the end that "there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory . . . *I simply am not there*" (376-7). The truly provocative idea here--that the yuppie male ceases to exist as he comes into contact with the feminine--appears in the two earlier films I will next discuss, Blue Steel and Vampire's Kiss.

III. Blue Steel: Crazy in the Supermarket

"For a rookie cop, there's one thing more dangerous than uncovering a killer's fantasy. Becoming it." (movie tagline for Blue Steel)

Blue Steel (1990) is Kathryn Bigelow's third film, co-written with Eric Red (who scripted The Hitcher and Bigelow's Near Dark), and despite or due to its occasional

showing on cable television, is an under-appreciated work from this director. The film stars Jamie Lee Curtis as Megan Turner, a newly graduated recruit of New York City's Police Academy who leads an otherwise quiet and lonely life. One night, while her male partner is using the restroom, Turner is witness to a holdup in a supermarket, and after a standoff with the thug (Tom Sizemore), she blasts him through the storefront window with six bullets from her service revolver. The thug's gun falls in front of yuppie commodities trader Eugene Hunt, played by Ron Silver, and he secretly takes the gun and hides it. With the gun missing, and none of the witnesses able to corroborate her story, Turner is put on suspension for shooting an unarmed man. Soon, though, her name shows up carved on bullets recovered from a series of murdered bodies, and little does she suspect that the man she has just begun dating, Eugene Hunt, is responsible for these random killings. As Hunt and Turner become romantically involved, Turner also begins working with tough-guy homicide detective Nick Mann (Clancy Brown) in order to solve the case with her name on it. Blue Steel, intercutting between Eugene and Megan's lives from the time of the holdup, derives its tension by showing the audience Eugene's increasing insanity while keeping Megan in the dark as to her lover's secret life. But, even when Megan discovers what has happened, she is alternately constrained from stopping Hunt by her department's disbelief, the yuppie's crack lawyer, and her fear for her friends and family. After Eugene shoots her best friend Tracy (Elizabeth Pena), Megan must finally violate the law in order to get her revenge on the now-psychotic Hunt.

Bigelow's film is, as reviewers were apt to point out, quite bloody. There are scores of deaths, most of which happen in spectacular, cinematic fashion. Take the thug's death, for instance, wherein Turner empties her gun into his chest, splattering blood everywhere, and sending him flying backwards through a plate glass window. The

editing pattern supports the spectacle, repeating the moment he hits the window three times, and offering medium shots of the entry wounds. The violence of the thug's death at the film's beginning is mitigated by the satisfaction that the nervous rookie heroine is safe and sound, but this extreme type of violence continues throughout; whether directed towards friend, foe, or stranger, these shooting deaths are vividly unpleasant. In this foregrounding of violent spectacle, Blue Steel shares features with Bigelow's previous film, the critically well-received vampire western Near Dark (1987). The success of that film, her marriage to powerful Hollywood director James Cameron, having Oliver Stone and Edward R. Pressman as producers, and Bigelow's reputation as an attractive woman ("a nearly model-perfect face" [Sharkey H17, cf. Lane 63-4]) had predisposed at least one critic or another to anticipate Blue Steel with suspicion, and so its mixed reception is as much a fate of its circumstances as it is of its cinematic content. While Bigelow fielded the same questions all female directors working in Hollywood must receive, the apparently feminist subject matter of this film and its self-stated intention to be a cross between Dirty Harry and Fatal Attraction made the question of (or the critical decision about) the film's sexual politics even more relevant and divisive. Along these lines, Blue Steel is generally discussed in relation to Jonathan Demme's The Silence of the Lambs (1991), since both share not only many broad and small qualitative features--female investigators, difficult training sequences, mentorship relationships with men, psychosexual villains, and knowledgeable references to specularity and the cinematic apparatus--but also since both are unusual in depicting what is referred to as a "postfeminist" female detective: rookie, ambiguously sexed, in the position of both acting subject in the cinematic narrative while simultaneously also the object of the male gaze.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ See Linda Mizejewski for her excellent phrase "the female dick," Elizabeth Young for readings comparing the two films, and Judith Halberstam on The Silence of the Lambs's "posthuman gender."¹⁵⁶

Rather than continue this initial line of critique, which demonstrated the identificatory problem viewers have with the space created between female detectives and female victims,¹⁵⁷ I would like to instead turn attention towards Blue Steel's villainous yuppie killer, Eugene Hunt, who has been overlooked in the emphasis on Megan Turner's character (and also in later comparisons with the exceedingly complicated dual villains in The Silence of the Lambs). In many ways, Ron Silver plays Eugene Hunt as a classic thriller film psychopath. On the one hand, he presents himself to the authorities, to Megan, and to Megan's parents as a perfectly innocent, cultured and sensitive gentlemen (to the contrary of Megan's and the audience's knowledge). On the other hand are the private scenes the camera allows us; beginning with his unobserved theft of the gun, leading to his auditory hallucinations, and building up to a blood-drenched, rooftop yowling at the moon. Eugene Hunt is a mix of thriller tropes: he is predatory and cunning, he charms his way into the heroine's family, he knows how to cover his tracks and stay one step ahead, and he displays cinematically classic "psycho" behavior--killing a prostitute, hearing voices from God, and overconfidently taunting his victims. The difference with this killer, though, lies in his particular psychosis, which, I argue, is importantly coded as a yuppie one. Now, while Eugene Hunt will be a prototype for later representations of yuppie killers (especially in television police dramas), Blue Steel allows him complex motives instead of simply name-checking the yuppie as part of the 80s setting.

Others would disagree. David Denby, in a debatable reading, writes Eugene Hunt off as simply "a schizophrenic commodities trader" (76). Janet Maslin, pointing out the presence of the "yuppie devil" in other contemporary films like Internal Affairs and Bad

¹⁵⁷ Although this reading certainly inflects, and is a necessary part of, my reading of Blue Steel. See especially Mary Ann Doane on this point.

Influence, points out that “Blue Steel reveals almost nothing else about [Eugene], yet it counts on audiences to greet him with instinctive mistrust. . . . When the film assumes that this man automatically has the makings of a psychotic killer, it doesn’t imagine itself to be making any kind of leap” (“Now, Slyly” B1). Utilizing a surface/depth model of psychology, Maslin elsewhere claims that “it is the film’s contention that just beneath his high-gloss yuppie surface there lurks a deranged, psychotic killer yearning to break free” (“A Deranged Yuppie” C18). Roger Ebert agrees in substance and form, writing that Hunt is “a customer who hit the deck long before the shooting started. He is already a deeply troubled man” (1). While it is certainly in keeping with yuppie iconography to describe Hunt’s superficial qualities, it is contradictory to assert also that underneath this is a “depth” which can be so simply described. It is precisely against these kinds of readings of Hunt, which ignore any distinctions or shadings in his yuppie persona in favor of a one-dimensional reading of ill-defined “schizophrenia” or “psychosis,” that I want to situate my own analysis. The “customer who hits the deck” is, like the maligned yuppie, a construction which works to contain contradiction and nuance by appealing to the vague category of mental illness.

As Blue Steel develops, we find that Eugene’s behavior, which might be summarily dismissed as but a product of his insanity, actually works in counterpoint to the film’s development of Megan’s character; the two come into being by means of their increasingly complex relationship. In this, Blue Steel sets itself apart not only from other *policiers* and cop thrillers, but also from other yuppie films. Three general questions arise, which explore the Yuckie’s gendered relationship to power without succumbing to a psychologically motivated description of Eugene’s behavior. First, why does he steal the gun in the supermarket; then, why does he direct his random murders, by means of the

engraved bullets, towards Megan; and finally, how does his sense of sexual desire or nondesire figure into his very real physical desire for the phallic Megan? Readings of these questions get especially caught between Eugene's personality--an unhappy-for-no-reason Wall Street yuppie--and the odd object of Eugene's desire--repeating the primal scene with Megan holding out her gun, blasting away.

1. Stealing the Gun

First is the question of why Eugene takes and hides the gun. Structurally, the holdup scene recalls the film's opening, precredit sequence, where, in a realistic training scenario, Turner has to respond to an emergency where a man is holding a gun to a woman's head (the first of a number of such images in the film). Megan successfully shoots the man and rescues the woman, but ultimately fails her test when she does not notice the man's "wife" pull a gun from her purse and "shoot" Turner. At this, Megan rolls her eyes and curses, and the viewer quickly realizes that the scenario is all fake. Megan's superior admonishes her with the supernatural wisdom: "in the field you've got to have eyes in the back of your head," a warning that Turner will later fail to remember in the supermarket.¹⁵⁸ Once Turner has graduated and this scenario later plays for real in the supermarket holdup, the film slots Megan back into the student role, and explicitly connects the faked reality of the training sequence with the true reality of "the field" of New York City. Since the rest of the film concerns Megan's mentored relationship with homicide detective Nick Mann, it is striking that, from the beginning, *Blue Steel* so carefully equates faked, "educational" violence with real, "field" violence; this is true for Megan as well as for the viewer. In the supermarket, having seen Megan already make

¹⁵⁸ While Turner yet again fails to see Eugene when he comes from behind, killing Tracy, she does notably take this advice at film's end, when Eugene rises up in the distance behind her on a subway platform and she spins around to shoot him, precipitating their final showdown.

this mistake once, and being uncertain about the unknown man who reaches for the thug's dropped gun (we notice his cufflinks, his manicured beard, and his bright eyes--seeming entirely innocent), viewers can only assume that the yuppie, just like the fake in the earlier training scenario, takes the gun with the intention of using it. His hiding of the gun, however, is surprising, suggesting either an ungraspable present need (maybe he's in money trouble? or some illness or other plot contrivance?) or an example of yuppie opportunism (an illegal, untraceable gun does have a certain value, after all). The film appears to suggest that people don't kill people, guns kill people--Eugene certainly doesn't look like a killer, but that .44 Magnum does. In this world, practice makes perfect, and since Megan fails a second time to notice the thug's dropped gun (because, perhaps, she is so excited about using her own), the crux of the film's plot becomes predicated upon teaching this girl how to pay attention, and especially how to pay attention to other people's guns.¹⁵⁹

This foregrounding of the gun as a live object, and its fetishized presence in these characters' imagination, is established earlier in the film's opening credits, which appear over tracking shots across a strange blue landscape, which turn out to be extreme close-ups of Turner's service revolver, a Smith & Wesson .38. The microscopic focus, geometric framing, and cool palette and soundtrack all serve to eroticize the gun, but as has been pointed out, the otherwise phallic gun is here contoured as feminine. This slowly moving landscape of blue steel next cuts to a close up of a stomach being buttoned inside a blue shirt. As the camera moves upward to reveal a lacy bra and then Jamie Lee Curtis's face, we realize that "the 'blue steel' . . . is not the gun--it's Megan Turner," reinforcing the particulars of this gun's feminine erotics (Garcia 365). Film critic

¹⁵⁹ Other things Megan cannot "see": the marks on her mother's arm (which the father causes), Silver's erratic behavior (which the viewer sees).

Christina Lane takes this one step further, pointing out that, “rather than impart the point of view of the bullets going into the chamber from the outside in, [Bigelow] presents the insertion ‘from within,’ perhaps suggesting a point of view that is gendered female” (71).

Yet there is another layer to the opening credits, and that is Bigelow’s projection of the cinematic apparatus onto the gun-feminine dialectic, using the camera to adjudicate further between the blue feminine and the phallic steel. As the Smith & Wesson’s chamber turns, it remarkably resembles a spinning film reel, enlivening the familiar pun between camera shot and gun shot.¹⁶⁰ This is one of many references to the cinematic or visual apparatus in *Blue Steel*, and cinema in particular seems a useful metaphor for Bigelow’s understanding of sex and violence.¹⁶¹ The opening shots identify this cinematic knowledge with the contours of the gun, and so it is *this* struggle (as opposed to the normal *pas de deux* between hunter and hunted--see Clover’s discussions of Final Girl and her requisite monstrosity¹⁶²) that we follow: who will control and contain the gun, and thus the site of cinematic knowledge (which is itself, after Mary Ann Doane’s argument, mixed with knowledge of sexual difference)?

What these opening cinematic references make clear is the role of vision in the construction of Megan and Eugene’s relationship. Eugene’s fascination with the thug’s gun is at least as complicated as Megan’s relationship with her own gun. The only two people in the store who saw the thug’s gun were Megan and Eugene, and Megan makes two mistakes in not noticing where the gun went and in not noticing where the yuppie went. As Megan is visually identified in the opening credits with her gun, so is Hunt identified with the thug’s gun by virtue of the two of them not being seen. In this seeing

¹⁶⁰ N.B. Paul Virilio’s *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1989).

¹⁶¹ Her later science fiction film *Strange Days* (1995) explores this topic fully, imagining a way to record and play back images, thoughts, and feelings directly from the cerebral cortex.

¹⁶² Mizejewski, summarizing Linda Williams, puts it succinctly: “the Final Girl of the horror genre must herself turn monstrous in her attack on the psychopath/murderer” (12).

and nonseeing is the unlikely connection between a rookie woman cop and a male yuppie psycho. And, once again, as Megan learns to “see” better and get those eyes in the back of her head, and Eugene strives to get others to see him (more on this later), they are also forced to consider the visual meaning of the irreducible object between them--the gun. There are, to be sure, two guns at play throughout--a “legal,” sanctified one, properly owned by the improper “female dick,” and the “illegal” one, passed on from a street thug to a yuppie who has everything he needs except this transgression. In both cases, the erstwhile neutral gun (“guns don’t kill people, people kill people”) represents the fulfillment of their functions together; we need to keep in mind that both Eugene and Megan are novices at gunplay, and thus both must work to sort out the proper and improper uses of their guns.

After the holdup, Megan is introduced to Detective Nick Mann, whose role and last name set off a series of male characters that question the acuity of Megan’s vision. After she identifies the make of the thug’s gun (a .44 Magnum), Mann questions how Turner could have known that from the forty feet distance between her and the thug. Megan’s unequivocal response--“I saw it. It was there. I saw it. I saw the metal glint”--is unsatisfactory for Mann, who performs another version of the earlier training scenario. Asking her to recreate the standoff, he quickly reaches for his gun, and, when she pulls hers on him, reveals himself to be merely holding a comb. This serves as proof of Megan’s “overreaction,”¹⁶³ and destabilizes again the relationship between reality and play or training. Like the earlier test scenario, Megan fails because her eyes are not yet quick enough or good enough. Ironically, she has a quick draw and good aim with her gun, but as a female rookie, she is identified by the men as a washout. As Mann leaves,

¹⁶³ Chief Hoyt had just said to her, “but the fact remains that you emptied an entire load. I suggest to you that there may have been some overreaction on your part.”

Megan shows she is beginning to understand what is expected of her, pointedly saying “I’ll be seeing you.”

Later, Mann and Turner develop a more overtly specular relationship, which mirrors the one which Hunt will develop for Turner. Mann needs to use Megan as bait to lure the unknown killer, telling their boss Chief Hoyt, “I gotta position her with high visibility.” After the next killing, with the media swarming and looking at them, Mann begins training Megan, instructing her to “examine the crime scene,” and to read the forensic evidence there. From the position of the body, she decides that “maybe [the killer] likes them to see it coming,” a reading reinforced when Megan does discover who the killer is, and his fascination with reflected gazes. Megan also has to “like to see it”; since she is the only lead the police have, Mann has her looking at the file cards of past criminals. “Keep looking,” he demands, to which she wearily replies, “only 600,000 more faces to look at.” Later, as Megan begins increasingly to pursue Hunt, staking out his apartment and following him (since there is no concrete evidence on Hunt, Mann tells her “just watch”), so too does Mann begin to pursue and follow Megan. Naturally, when Turner discovers that Mann has been following her as she follows Eugene, she is upset, asking “didn’t think I could handle it?” Mann’s response is similar to one that Eugene would give: “I wanted to watch you handle it.”

“Are you seeing anybody,” Megan’s best friend Tracy asks early in the film at a barbecue. Tracy introduces Megan to Howard, who provides one version of a repeated scene where Megan is asked why she chose to become a cop. In each case, Megan gives a joking answer, and in each case someone is told to “lighten up” their visibly horrified look. In this case, when Megan tells Howard that she is a police officer, he noticeably blanches, which she calls attention to: “you look bad.” Before asking her, “why would

you want to become a cop,” he makes reference to her looks: “you’re a good looking woman; I mean, beautiful, in fact.” For Howard, as for others, the incongruity of Megan’s “look” with the seriousness of her job (he asks “you wear a gun?”) frustrates her. She gives Howard one joking answer--“I like to slam people’s heads up against walls,” echoing what she earlier told her partner, who, moments before the holdup, asked the same question. There, she responded “yeah, I wanted to shoot people.” But these defensive, joking answers drop away when she is asked a third time by Mann. To his question, “so what made you want to become a cop,” she simply answers “him.” The most obvious referent for “him” is Megan’s alcoholic father, whom she has just almost arrested for beating her mother. Some reviewers, like Roger Ebert, have commented on the curiously undeveloped subplot involving the father, and ascribe Turner’s reason for becoming a cop to him. Early in the film, we learn that he did not go to her graduation, later saying in disbelief “I’ve got a goddamn cop for a daughter.” His anger leads to one reading which emphasizes the performative aspects of Megan’s tough-cop persona, which she later only lets down in front of Nick; this reading relies on her dressing at the end of the opening credits and the “drag” she performs when she steals an oversized uniform for her final confrontation. While *Blue Steel* avoids casting too much suspicion on its heroine (unlike, more recently, Jane Campion’s *In the Cut*), there is the possibility that Turner is serious with her other, more violent answers, that like the superficial yuppie with the dark interior, Megan’s touch-cop persona also covers over a homicidal inner life.

For Turner, looking is part of her job, and from the opening scenes it is marked as a skill she needs to develop.¹⁶⁴ For Eugene, too, looking is a crucial part of his obsession

¹⁶⁴ In this, *Blue Steel* is reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa’s *Stray Dog* (1949), about a rookie policeman who loses his gun, which is then used in crimes.

with Megan, and the film makes numerous references to the attention or inattention he pays to certain objects. Directly before the first murder, Eugene walks aimlessly through the rain through a “Don’t Walk” sign; the driver of the car that almost hits him shouts, “hey what are you, fucking blind!” He next does not see a crack in the sidewalk; when he trips, his gun falls out and he shoots the accidental onlooker. Later, walking aimlessly again, he is startled as if by a ghost when a prostitute comes on to him. And, of course, mirrors in particular make up an important part of his mental world. After work at the New York Stock Exchange, we see him staring at a mirror, pointing the stolen gun at himself and mimicking a gun’s “pow!”, his eyes darting between himself and the door, recalling the way his eyes darted during the holdup. During a later workout scene, Eugene is sitting on his exercise machine, watching a television report about “The .44 Magnum Killer’s” fourth victim. Facing the camera, he looks at the television on the lower right of the screen, whose reflection we can see in a mirror to the left of the screen. It is not that Eugene is figured by the film as unseeing, rather it is the case that he sees only one thing-- Megan and her gun during the holdup. At that time, the film cut prominently between Megan, the cashier and the thug, and two bystanders: Eugene and an old lady. Unlike the old lady and the cashier, Eugene’s eyes were not downturned; rather, he was actively watching the exchange between Turner and the thug (indeed, the editing pattern relies on Eugene’s eye movements to bridge some of the shots).

Eugene is fixated throughout on this “first sight,” mentioning it accidentally to Megan. After he forces a meet with her by sharing a taxi, he takes her to a fancy restaurant and, in a Woody Allen imitation, tries to explain: “I saw you standing there; it was pouring. You were wet, cold. You reminded me of a cat I used to have. I couldn’t resist.” Megan is suitably flattered, if still a bit cautious, and Eugene continues, almost

unwittingly letting out his secret when he reminisces, “the first time I laid eyes on you. . .” before quickly saying, for the second time, that his being there “is very unusual for me.”¹⁶⁵ Parting after this first date, Megan says “hope to see you again,” to which Eugene replies “there’s no question about that.”¹⁶⁶

By developing so thoroughly a visual metaphor both for and between Megan and Eugene’s characters, Blue Steel shift ironic emphasis from the gun--the blue steel--back onto the phallic representation of power and authority. Hunt steals the gun to take part in the spectacle of feminine, authorized violence he just witnessed. The gun represents for Hunt the possible tools for a reconstruction of the primal scene where the act of violence replaces and becomes symbolic of power. His practice on strangers or in the mirror unsuccessfully replicate that initial scene, and it becomes increasingly clear that what Hunt wants is not Megan, or the gun, or more power, but rather all of these contained in one image: woman+phallus+authority+violence.

Bigelow puns with their sight of each other one more time, when Megan abruptly says to Eugene over dinner, “look,” as in “look, I have to tell you something.” He responds “what” and she simply says “me.” Megan’s awkward, monosyllabic conversation fails to make sense of the series of looks that the film develops between them. Is she saying look at me? Or, the look is me? Or, look, why pick me? Her anxiety passes, and when she gushes “I feel like I’m on top of the world,” the scene resolves cleanly into a conventionally romantic, if expensive, one, where Eugene takes her on a nighttime helicopter tour of lower Manhattan. There, pointing out a sight (“Look,” she

¹⁶⁵ Earlier, picking her up in the cab, he says “I don’t make a habit of this.” Eugene seems surprised by the habits he finds himself developing. Young comments on the notion of seriality, and I would extend that idea from Hunt’s serial killer persona to the seriality of his yuppie life as a commodities trader. Regarding American Psycho, Helyer notes that repetition, in the Gothic genre, is “indicative of a human urge to keep certain bounds” (736).

¹⁶⁶ Compare this with the scene where Megan and Mann first meet--“I’ll be seeing you”--and Mann leaves on a similar exchange.

says), he delivers a suggestive speech whose pointedness is caught up by romance: “You know, when you’re way up here, looking down, people they’re just little specks. Like they don’t matter much. It’s just the two of us; we’re the only people in the world.” This sentiment is the familiar, self-interested yuppie attitude, and it entrances Megan. The film’s villainization of the yuppie is thus incomplete because of Megan’s attraction. Megan’s middle-class origins and her initial caution and suspicion about Hunt’s attraction to her show us the dangerous allure of the privileged lifestyle of a Eugene Hunt. Hailing a cab when they first meet, Hunt makes a reference to The Wizard of Oz--“hey, remember what happened to Dorothy when she didn’t get out of the storm”--but in many ways Blue Steel’s true structuring narrative is Cinderella--remember what happened to Cinderella when she didn’t get back home in time, when she stayed out too long with a strange, rich man?

2. Bullet With Her Name On It

Eugene Hunt turns his initial obsessions with the thug’s gun towards Megan, and in a taunting, ritualistic gesture, he engraves her name on the bullets he uses to kill his victims. How are we to explain this inscription, which continues to develop (and literally marks) the gun’s libidinal economy, but also at the same time seems pathetically shallow? If Hunt has no clear reason for taking the gun, or for shooting his victims, then the deliberate name-carving seems to also be another cinematic signifier of dangerous obsession. After his theft of the gun, the next “strange” thing we see Eugene do is to work on these bullets, although we do not know what he is carving until we later see Mann hold up the recovered bullet. The idea for this may also be contained as another detail from the holdup; consider what the thug twice says to the cashier during the

holdup: “what, do you want it engraved?,” impatiently signaling with the pronoun both an invitation and the waiting bullet. It is not far-fetched to later hear the thug’s words in Eugene’s imagination as he carves the bullets. But Eugene’s scratching of “Megan Turner” on the bullets is contradictorily assigned by the film because it establishes two unique but related relationships--Megan and Eugene’s, and Megan and Mann’s. On the one hand, it serves as Eugene’s threat to Megan--there is a bullet with your name on it (when Megan is brought in to explain, she tells Mann “I don’t think of myself as the kind of girl who gets her name on a bullet”).¹⁶⁷ But, as we see, Eugene never takes up any of the multiple opportunities he has to shoot Megan, until the closing moments, after she shoots him first; in fact, quite the opposite is the case when we earlier see him asking Megan to shoot him.

As demonstrated earlier, the film clearly connects Megan’s uniformed body with her gun’s blue steel. Along these lines, we can also read Eugene’s scratched bullets as a demand for her body; he’s not threatening her, but calling her, providing her name-as-death as a way to fill in the gap between her body and her gun. I want to return to this “open space” momentarily, but I should note here that all of the bullets in Blue Steel are labeled, for they become by and in their performance part of the shootist. “You emptied an entire load” says Chief Hoyt to Megan, implying that “her load”--an overreaction--should have been saved or would have been better used. When he inscribes the bullets, Eugene literalizes Megan’s load--assigning value-in-a-name (like a good yuppie) to the bullets.

Of course, it is the tough homicide detective, Nick Mann, who is at first responsible for properly reading Megan Turner’s name, and comprehending the

¹⁶⁷ Further, just as Eugene was paired off with the old lady during the holdup by rhyming shots of the two of them, so does Megan Turner have an older “twin” living in New York City--Megan Augusta Turner, who turns out to be an 86-year-old Bronx woman living in a nursing home.

significance of her appropriated load as he calls her in to explain the bullets.¹⁶⁸ This provides a third reading of the bullets, and looks ahead to the triangular relationship that develops among Megan, Eugene, and Mann, a relationship connected by their exchange of looks and bullets--the inscribing of names on bullets is matched at the end of the film by the inscription of bullets on skin. Eugene is shot in his upper left arm by Megan (he pulls the bullet out with his fingers, gazing into a mirror while doing so), and he later shoots her in the same place. In a way, it is Mann and Eugene who seek each other out--the detective wants to put Megan in "high visibility" and the killer wants to put Megan's name as a clue to find him ("if it wasn't so bold, it would be stupid," Mann grudgingly comments). Introduced as a tough police veteran and as part of the boy's club at the police station (while Hoyt is his boss, they treat each other more like drinking buddies), and then made a kind of paternal mentor to Megan (replacing her alcoholic, absent, abusive father), the film finally asks Nick Mann to represent heterosexual normativity. Recall that he first points a comb instead of a gun at Megan, and despite (or because of) this reference to his curly, "feminine" hair (Megan's is short), he provides an acceptable release for Megan's otherwise ambiguous sexuality when he sleeps with her at the height of their danger. While this ambiguity stems most obviously from her "inappropriate" job, from her masculine dress, from her close relationship with Tracy, and her friend's continuous nagging about settling down, I think most telling are not lesbian signifiers, but rather the absence of heterosexual signification.¹⁶⁹ Also relevant is Mann's disbelieving comment when Megan denies having any violent ex-boyfriends: "what, no old boyfriends--is that a personal problem?" This comment is one of the many domesticating

¹⁶⁸ Another stretched reading of the named bullets is that Eugene is so turned on by her blasting the thug away that he simply wants to be like her, naming his little bullets in mimicry. This falls apart, though, in light of Eugene's later expressed desire to "share" with Megan.

¹⁶⁹ See Young on the same function in *The Silence of the Lambs*, which figures its detective as neither straight nor gay, but rather something else.

events between Mann and Megan which culminate in their sexual encounter, beginning with his paternalistic, omniscient comment to Hoyt, “if she pees I gotta know about it,” through to his criticism of the contents of her cupboard (“you ever shop?”); waiting in her apartment while she is on a date with Eugene, he quips “you want to keep secrets, do me a favor: go shopping.”¹⁷⁰

Blue Steel offers another mini-narrative which better illustrates the engraved bullet’s significance in representing the exchange of sexuality in the film. Bursting in on Megan’s meeting with Chief Hoyt just after the holdup, the film introduces Mann as he starts telling Hoyt a story (“you gotta hear this”). Mann, oblivious to Turner’s presence, describes a man from New Jersey who, receiving oral sex from a prostitute in a cab, had his penis bitten off when the cab hit a pothole. The punch line of the story is that while “she’s still got a dick in her mouth,” the man “don’t want to go to a hospital because he’s somebody,” and so “the hooker pulls out a needle and thread [and] sews his dick on backwards.” Turner, disgusted, interrupts by saying “I wonder what he’s gonna say to his wife,” at which point Mann notices her and turns professional, critiquing her handling of the holdup (asking “why didn’t you just tackle him?”). This scene, and the story that Mann tells, demonstrates the film’s structuration of sexual relationships, which are doubly inflected by economic and patriarchal power. The john (“he’s somebody,” just like Eugene) cannot go to the proper authorities, and thus is a sympathetically comic figure to the police, who can relate, as men, to the difficulties in regulating sexual life and social life. While the john remains the butt (or the dick) of the joke, Mann makes the hooker’s stupidity the point of his telling of the story. Meant to be a story between male buddies, their joke further reflects upon Megan’s own uneasy role in these kinds of

¹⁷⁰ Although, this is not very likely to occur; the film portrays Megan as very much not a domestic figure; in a later scene with Tracy, Megan mock-proudly tends the stove, saying “there, I boiled water.”

power relationships. The two men, innocently sharing a humorous story (“you gotta hear this, you’ll piss yourself”), effectively exclude Megan permanently from police life. Already forced to defend herself on procedural grounds, what defense could she possibly mount against this kind of thinking?

Not only does the story marginalize Megan’s presence on the force, but the detail of the hooker’s well-intentioned misplacement of the man’s penis appropriately captures the film’s construction and critique of women’s role in men’s affairs. Having lost his penis because of a woman (and in an illicit relationship he must hide in order to protect the privileged status which allows such women in the first place), the man has no recourse but to turn to this hooker in order to help him put it back on.¹⁷¹ The hooker’s needle and thread and her expected skill at sewing recall the familiar feminine trope of the weaving woman (and the trope of the male desire for the domesticated whore). Her getting it backwards, though, and then being laughed at later by two men, demonstrates this film’s deep confusion between the sexes. The passing back and forth of the penis, signaling the appropriate and inappropriate use of the phallus, expresses *Blue Steel*’s anxious content, but this lesson is entirely lost on Mann and Hoyt, who share the story between themselves, leaving Turner out of it in a way that simply recirculates their anxiety. The point, which the guys miss, but which Megan relies on from the start, is that the phallus is mobile. The film’s exchanges make this clear: the passing back and forth of guns in the first half of the film (Eugene taking the thug’s, Chief Hoyt taking Megan’s) is structurally matched by the passing back and forth of bullets at the end.¹⁷² The passing back and forth of the guns, the passing back and forth of bullets, and the passing back and forth of the

¹⁷¹ Mann significantly tells Hoyt that the cabbie--the other accessible male--was simply upset about the blood in the car.

¹⁷² Eugene describes his work as a trader as misanthropic. Similarly, trading bullets, like trading gold, “is kind of a misanthropic enterprise, when you think about it”; people buy bullets, like gold, “betting that everything else in the world’s going to go to hell.”

penis all represent the same thing: the inaccessibility of one gender to another, and the use and care men and women should have for their phalluses. So, does Blue Steel set up Megan to be the hooker with the penis in her mouth; is one either the hooker or the john? From Mann's point of view--yes, and the question for him will be whether Megan can sew the case on backwards or straightwards. Eugene, too, in naming these detached bullets after Megan, asks the same question.

3. His Odd Desire, Open Zones

At this point we need to consider the nature of Eugene's sexual desire for Megan. Initially, he is curiously aloof towards her; when she first invites him up to her apartment, he surprises her by responding, "soon." Eugene's desire is ironically less "masculine" than Megan's, only expressing his need most clearly to Mann near the end of the film. Mann, handcuffed to the steering wheel by Megan, has Eugene's gun to his head. Eugene demands, "look at me. I want to see you. I want to see you see it. See it in your face: the reverence, the light, then nothing." Eugene's quasi-religious tone is apparently a product of the voices he hears in his head, perhaps from God, which first manifest themselves when Eugene is lifting weights. At that time, the musical score signified suspense with an almost angelic, synthesized choir. Not hearing the voices that Eugene hears, we must decipher whether he is relaying only one side of the conversation or both:

What? What? Who are you? Why are you talking to me?¹⁷³ You are God,
Eugene. You are unique, Eugene. But unto them that fear your name shall the
son/sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.¹⁷⁴ You are not alone,

¹⁷³ Note that this mirrors Megan's earlier question to Eugene.

¹⁷⁴ The religious quotation is from Malachi 4:2, except Eugene appears to address God ("that fear your name") while in the original God speaks ("that fear my name").

Eugene. Oh, God. Stop it! Stop talking to me! I can't hear you! I can't hear you, God!

While some of this is conventional “person going crazy” dialogue, Eugene’s desire for uniqueness is crucial, especially in regards to the earlier scenes of him at work on the floor of the Stock Exchange, struggling to be heard. It is immediately after hearing voices that Eugene finds his first female victim, a prostitute (although we are not told the fate of the third victim, the other two were men, both in their 40s). The filmmakers are discreet about her murder (did they first have sex? did he use his gun?), although as the camera pans across a rooftop looking at the New York skyline, we hear Eugene’s offscreen panting and screeching. Finally, the camera settles on Eugene’s back as he undresses (reversing the earlier shot of Turner dressing), and although the prostitute’s body is not in the shot, Hunt grabs her blood-drenched dress and wipes his body with it. By no means the first violent act, the film approaches this scene as Eugene’s first major transgression,¹⁷⁵ not only has the camera yet to be coy in regards to violence, offering close-ups and medium shots of bullet wounds and gunshots, but Hunt’s savagery, wiping blood on himself, is the most over-the-top scene in a film already excessively bloody. The prostitute’s murder, strangely left unshown (was it about sex or death? how does it relate to Mann’s earlier story?), leads directly into Eugene’s psychosexual play with Megan. Only, in fact, after killing the prostitute does Eugene admit Megan into his sexual life.

Another cinematic reference serves to bridge Eugene’s killing of the prostitute and Megan’s incipient discovery that he was present during the holdup. After a brief scene where Mann and Megan argue, the film cuts to an image of a hand turning a crank, visually recalling the gun’s cylinder/film reels shown during the credits. We soon realize that this is not the crank of a camera or projector, but rather that Megan is moving a

¹⁷⁵ Next of the three is killing Tracy, and finally is raping Megan.

paper target in place in a shooting range. As she takes shots at the target, extremely strong backlighting makes it look like a punctured movie screen. Megan's firing of the gun, marked in relationship to the cinematic apparatus, satisfies her immensely, although in the next scene when Eugene reveals his presence at her performance in the supermarket, she is upset to be unwittingly playing a role in his mind other than the "new girlfriend" she thought she was. After shooting a few rounds, Megan steps lightly down the street, teasingly passing Eugene, who (for the viewer who has just seen him drenched in the prostitute's blood) is waiting creepily outside. She gives a coy turn and a very passionate kiss, moving his hand to her neck and to her breast. Here is the most open and vulnerable that we have seen Megan, and its masochistic elements--consisting of Eugene putting his hands around Megan's throat--continue in the next scene, when Megan enters Hunt's apartment, and they are about to have sex.

As Megan and Eugene embrace, her holstered gun instantly becomes part of their sexual play. He is able to identify it by touch, "a .38," and begs her not to take it off. Echoing what the earlier blind date Howard said, who referred to her beauty right before asking about her gun, Eugene tells her "in the morning, your face is there even before I open my eyes . . . I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life." This scene is romantic, except for the fact that what Eugene finds beautiful in Megan--the inner picture that is constantly with him--is something behind Megan's face. In a plea embarrassing for both Megan and the viewer, Eugene asks her to "take out your gun and hold it" with two hands. She finally does so, and, pressing the barrel against his forehead, he reveals his role as voyeur during the holdup: "I knew, the first time I saw you [that] I have found my brightness." Calling the thug's gun his "radiance," the film shifts Eugene's apparent fetishization of the gun onto his fetishization of Megan's role in the hold-up.

This yuppie does not want the material object--he does not ask for Megan's gun, or produce his own as a kind of counterpart. Instead, he wants to recreate the used object, or rather, the object-in-use which the gun represents. In this case, it is the yuppie's desire for power, fetishized by Eugene as Megan's "legal" power to kill. Hunt discovered, during the holdup, what Foucault refers to in The History of Sexuality: An Introduction as the difference between the right of death and power over life. Blasting the thug out of the window, Turner opens up a zone of sexual authority, of phallic transformation, without, as Hunt noticed, blinking an eye. "Why are you a cop, Megan?" Eugene finds his own answer as a witness to the holdup, and only a yuppie could in this way be turned on by the spectacle of mediated, legal death.

Megan's shooting of the thug creates an open zone of legal killing, which in its confused sexual content¹⁷⁶ suggests alternative modes of power for Eugene. Megan reads Eugene's insane speech: "I think he sees me as some sort of kindred spirit," and Eugene literalizes this in his next killing, when he shoots Megan's best friend Tracy. This scene, occurring at the film's one hour mark, is Eugene's second major transgression, and motivates the first of the "now-it's-personal" revenge motifs (the other is Megan's rape). It is also excessively violent and abusive, and thereby literalizes Eugene's desperate attempts to occupy the open space created by Turner during the holdup. Surprising them in the stairwell of Tracy's apartment, he comes from behind and puts his arm around Megan's neck. As he pulls her close from behind, Eugene strikes a hostage-taker's pose. The careful viewer will recall a similar pose from earlier in the film, when Megan grabs Tracy during the graduation scene, mugging with her best friend for the camera (and a third variation during the training sequence). Here, Megan frantically struggles to close

¹⁷⁶ The thug dismisses Turner, saying "I didn't come here to fuck with you bitch." Christina Lane describes Eugene's desire as being "catalyzed by Megan's own status as an outlaw in the realm of body politics. Megan cannot 'be' a woman's body in a male role" (72).

off the open space of Eugene's desire, which is to be, like Megan, a legitimately illegitimate shooter. Tracy gets one bullet; the camera cuts to outside the doorway, and her blood splatters the pane, covering the screen red.

After this, Megan attempts to displace Eugene's fetishization of her shooting-image back onto her own gun. Eugene has buried his stolen gun and Megan has been surveilling him. He goes to Central Park, digging and scratching around; his face covered with dirt, he makes yelping and panting animal noises, which build even further on his earlier howling at the moon. "Looking for something?" she asks. As if calming an animal, she continues, "it's OK," and unzips her shirt, revealing her holstered gun, held under the armpit near her breast. "I have one. Go on, Eugene, grab for it." Cutting to Eugene's face, we see him weigh the offer, and then we see flashback inserts of multiple angles of him grabbing the gun in the supermarket. Just as he is going to go for it, Mann arrives, prompting the bizarre line, "It's OK Nick, he's just going to grab my gun," before Mann grabs it instead and Eugene takes off. In classic Western convention, we see Turner operating according to the logic of the gun--only one of us can have it, and if he goes for it, then I'll have to give it to him. From this scene on, where Hunt rapes Megan and ultimately is killed after a spectacular chase and shootout (taking numerous bullets, getting run over by a car), Blue Steel abandons its villain for stereotypical horror conventions.

It is the film's spectacularly violent ending, generated by Hunt's unstoppable¹⁷⁷ pursuit of Megan, that covers over the complexity of the yuppie's desire. We might believe that Hunt was already insane before he entered the grocery store (which provides an easy solution to the film's problem); in this case we would need to read the film as a

¹⁷⁷ In another context, a Time magazine article reports in 1991 that "up to now, yuppies have proved harder to kill than Freddy Krueger" (W. Shapiro 65). This is certainly true of Blue Steel, and casting Halloween actress Jamie Lee Curtis, who also had to fend off an indestructible villain in that film, makes this clearer.

straightforward thriller, and understand the film's coding of Hunt as a yuppie as simply metaphoric for the kind of lonely, pointless, and crazy-making existence yuppies lead. Yet, I am not convinced by this reading, as it gives short shrift to the complexity of both Eugene's and Megan's character. The problem with reading Eugene as a metaphor for how Reagan-era excess and greed can make one crazy (and I will return to this when I discuss Vampire's Kiss) is that we may then be tempted to read Megan metaphorically as well--for how feminism, for example, can make guys crazy. While the film relies somewhat on the concept of a purely evil, obsessive psycho for the dramatic heft of its conclusion, more suggestive is a reading of the first three-fourths of Blue Steel as a parable of yuppie desire. Watching a woman shoot a man turned Hunt on, and especially so in the field of the supermarket. Rather than read his later psychotic break as a symptom of his yuppie lifestyle, his behavior indicates the forms of yuppie sociability that he is engaged in: he is unable to make sense of Turner, and finds in her a set of incompatible problems--"the female dick." The overrecognition of himself in her--("I know you better than you know yourself," "we're two halves of one person, you and I")--fuels the yuppie's ambition. "Death is the greatest kick of all," he tells Megan, "that's why they save it for last." And, with this final revelation, the yuppie's goal is clear: "being with Megan is the biggest kick of all." As he approaches the feminine, the male yuppie ceases to exist, entering as he does one place closed off to his power strategies.

IV. Vampire's Kiss: Plastic Teeth and Psychoanalysis

"Seduction. Romance. Murder. The things one does for love." (movie tagline for Vampire's Kiss)

Robert Bierman's Vampire's Kiss (1989) is another interesting, under-examined film from the 80s featuring a yuppie psycho. Bierman's first film, Vampire's Kiss stars Nicolas Cage as yuppie literary agent Peter Loew, who is (or is he?) bitten by a bat one night after picking up a woman at a trendy club. Loew becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea that he is turning into a vampire who is being courted by a second woman he later picks up, the vampire Rachel (Jennifer Beals). As he begins to exhibit the classic signs of vampirism, he starts to increasingly demonize his secretary Alva Restrepo (Maria Conchita Alonso), who in turn keeps warning him about the gun in her purse. Soon, Loew is so far gone that he hides behind sunglasses, sleeps under his overturned couch, shrinks in horror from mirrors, and wears plastic vampire's fangs. Unfairly spurned by Rachel after he bites his first victim, Loew is driven over the top; insane, talking to walls and dragging a big wooden stake through New York City's Lower East Side, successful yuppie Peter Loew meets his end as an ordinary vampire. What makes Vampire's Kiss so difficult to read is that while Peter in every respect follows a conventional vampire transformation narrative, at some point the audience realizes that he has actually not been bitten--that in fact everything he does as a vampire is a product of his fantasy, his yuppie identity, and his psychoanalytic exploration of sexual boredom and surface.

Vampire's Kiss is important because it is an anomaly, a rare instance of the naked display of the yuppie psycho trope that is otherwise contained or concealed in other 80s

depictions. By counterposing the vampire transformation narrative with the yuppie's investigation of himself, the film is driven from the beginning towards darkness; unlike Blue Steel, whose Eugene Hunt is too easily read from the beginning as another psycho, Vampire's Kiss disallows the reader the comfort of immediately understanding its protagonist. Part of the difficulty stems from the fact that it is evidently a black comedy, a subgenre much less common then than it is now. There are certainly humorous elements here not normally present in straight horror: for example, the film satirizes Loew's lifestyle and his psychiatrist, Cage uses a hilariously shifting accent (shades of early Keanu Reeves or Sean Penn in Fast Times at Ridgemont High) which is meant to sound pretentious, and he puts on a wildly over-the-top, scenery- (and cockroach-) chewing performance that, when he is not delivering lines, continually veers towards Keatonesque slapstick. However, at the same time the film can be exceedingly grim and unfunny, as when Loew, after twice attempting to shoot himself in the mouth, rapes his unconscious secretary, or when, after murdering a woman at a club, he attempts to publicly impale himself with a makeshift stake. There is no doubt about it, this is a very brutal and thematically ugly film. Interestingly, though, Vampire's Kiss does not feel disjointed; it manages simultaneously to elicit the comic and the horrific, a feat of counterpoint not only difficult to create, but also to watch. By so self-consciously mixing generic conventions, and by doing so in a highly mannered, impossibly satiric and caricatured way, Vampire's Kiss becomes a film that excludes its audience. It seems impossible for the filmmakers to ever recreate this tone; if they had known what they were doing, undoubtedly Vampire's Kiss would not have been made in the first place. It is difficult to imagine how to describe the tone of this film without unnecessarily emphasizing one element over the other, and since Loew's is a potentially unreliable point of view, more

obvious politically correct statements (like, “this film is misogynistic”) become less obvious.

Critics, of course, hated Vampire’s Kiss, especially attacking Cage’s performance as indulgent and the script, by Joseph Minion,¹⁷⁸ as directionless. Vampire’s Kiss is very much also a film about New York City, and Cage’s physical approach to his surroundings was seen only as so much scenery-chewing (“this is scorched-earth acting,” says one reviewer [Hinson C2]). What this kind of critique misses is that Peter Loew’s interaction with his surroundings is very much in keeping with the kind of aimless, superficial lifestyle this character would lead, and much more so than if Cage had played his yuppie like one of those in The Big Chill. Vampire’s Kiss marks its protagonist as a yuppie by emphasizing three things now familiar to the yuppie iconography: his dress (Paul Owen suits, dark glasses worn inside, stylish haircut), his surroundings (brownstone apartment, hangouts such as Tunnel and Mondo Cane, his windowed office with secretary’s intercom), and his therapy sessions (another beautifully scenic office, his vacant, repetitive, clock-watching discussions). Mirrors are everywhere in Loew’s New York, and he always takes time to check himself out, pursing his lips and arching his eyebrows.

Laid atop Loew’s yuppie character is the film’s other thematic element, the character of the vampire. The film contains classic vampire film iconography; taking F.W. Murnau’s version as its central text, Cage’s performance¹⁷⁹ and the film’s cinematography quote often from Nosferatu (1922), and Peter at one point even watches that film.

Vampire elements accumulate: the bat, the fear of crosses and of mirrors (since vampires cannot see their reflections), photosensitivity and nocturnal activity, the eating of insects

¹⁷⁸ Minion also wrote Martin Scorsese’s After Hours (1985), a companion piece tale of being stuck out of place in downtown New York.

¹⁷⁹ The actor Cage emulates is Max Shreck, whose performance is much more expressionistic and mannered than other later popular portrayals of the Count, such as Bela Lugosi’s in Tod Browning’s Dracula (1931).

and animals, the coffin, the experienced vampire's "turning" of a novice and his or her anxiety over his or her own first bite, the vampire's erotic imagery and telepathic control, the vampire's aesthetic and aristocratically groomed appearance, and, of course, the pointy teeth and bloodletting at the neckline. Vampires are perennially popular,¹⁸⁰ but the rather classic representation of the bloodsucker in Vampire's Kiss is problematized by its time and place; so many elements of the yuppie lifestyle are shared by the vampire (which is, obviously, the film's setup joke),¹⁸¹ that keeping the two distinct is impossible. It is a necessary task for the viewer, though, since our sympathy for Peter Loew is colored by whether we see him as victim of a malevolent force beyond his control, or whether we find this self-made man as the truer source of evil.

There is no doubt by the film's end that Peter Loew has become insane due to his experiences, but, like the suggestive nature of the gun in Blue Steel, there is an uncertainty about whether the yuppie goes insane because of an outside force, or whether we are meant to imagine the yuppie as already irreparably damaged and prone to psychosis. In answer, I would argue that the film's ethical content relies on its ability to leave the question of Peter's vampirism undecided. I am stretching the film a little here; it seems to me that Peter is more often marked by the film as not a vampire, and reviewers have in fact complained that the film is not as indeterminate in its setup as it could be.¹⁸² For example, the audience can see Peter reflected in mirrors, he is able to walk about during

¹⁸⁰ Other notable 80s vampire films include Tony Scott's The Hunger (1983), which is an arty, lesbian vampire film, that, while being pre-yuppie, still provides quite a prototypical visual feast with Catherine Deneuve and David Bowie. The Lost Boys (1987), by Joel Schumacher, represents a more popular teen movie; set in California and involving an adolescent gang of hip vampires, it is a sort of Brat Pack-style version of the vampire legend. Once Bitten (1985), with Jim Carrey and Lauren Hutton, seems a safely comic mixture of the vampire and the decade. (Of course, we should also mention the version Cage's uncle Francis Ford Coppola made in 1992). Rather than these predecessors, I find Vampire's Kiss more comparable to Roman Polanski's work; cf. The Fearless Vampire Killers (1967) and his apartment trilogy, especially The Tenant (1976) and Repulsion (1965).

¹⁸¹ Or as Marx pointed out, "capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks."

¹⁸² Critic Jay Carr, for example, wishes the film were more indirect and had a sense of dislocation.

the daylight, and he has to buy his pointy teeth. Also, a number of times the camera shows Peter addressing an empty room when he believes he is talking to Rachel; the sex/biting scenes with Rachel also occur with him lying passively on his back dressed in t-shirt and boxers, suggesting a masturbation fantasy. He is wearing the same clothes when, hunched over, he glazedly watches Nosferatu late at night, implying the extent to which he is only mimicking his vampirism.

On the other hand, the film allows one answering moment, which, while not as ambiguous as it would like to be, is still no less significant for its presence. Near the film's end, Loew is spurned by Rachel, who now has a new boyfriend, Donald. Chasing her down at Tunnel, Loew accosts her on the dance floor, shouting to the onlookers "look at her teeth." She says "shut up" rather vehemently (does she think he's making fun of them, or are they really pointy?) before smiling at Donald. This slight look between the two reinforces their complicity against Peter, and the viewer is asked to go back over the evidence that Peter is indeed a vampire: he certainly acts as one, sleeping in a coffin, drinking blood and eating pigeons, dying with a stake through his heart. It is the yuppie's death which makes it so hard to know--if he had died any other way (a gunshot, for example), then we would be able to more easily say that he is human. Likewise, the bandage that covers his neck raises problems--does it hide bite marks, or just a shaving cut? (One secretary, trying to read the mixed signals, simply says "he's so eccentric"). I recognize that part of this forced reading attempts to save the film by extending Peter every opportunity to be what he thinks he is, but the film's ethical content lies in the multiple possible readings. As in American Psycho, Vampire's Kiss puts the viewer in the difficult position of having to decide which is worse: a crazy yuppie who imagines he is a vampire, or a crazy yuppie who is a vampire (or in the case of American Psycho: a

crazy yuppie who gets away with gruesomeness, or one who only imagines that he does)? If Loew is truly a vampire, then we can accept the film as metaphorizing the relationship that yuppies have with society--they are just like bloodsucking vampires. But if Peter is acting this way because he truly believes he is a vampire, then does that mean that he is not really as evil as he appears? Is the murderous yuppie simply misunderstood, lonely, in need of help? The yuppie-vampire dialectic is one part of the way the film interrogates this "asymmetrical social relation between gender and power" (Young, "Silence" 9). Further complicating matters is the series of five different female relationships that Peter develops (three of these women have a similar "look," confusing matters, while Vampire's Kiss noticeably offers only minor male relationships--Peter's boss Langdon,¹⁸³ a chatty cab driver, and Alva's vengeful brother Emilio). As Peter's dependence on the fantasy of Rachel develops (a fantasy akin to Eugene Hunt's for Megan Turner), his relationships with other women become hopelessly exacerbated. Examining these female relationships illustrates the problems in the film's ambivalent tone, especially as regards Peter's own sense of helplessness in the hands of the vampiress.

The apparent aimlessness of the the film, which bothered critics, comes most from the lack of a unitary, structuring, heteronormative relationship.¹⁸⁴ While Loew is paired off sexually with the vampire Rachel, she is only one of many women whom Loew continually comes back to. First is his therapist, Dr. Dorothy Glaser, who is introduced in the film's first scene. Loew, lying on a couch, is telling her about having to deal with a

¹⁸³ Langdon is introduced at a meeting, where the guys sit around and laugh at Peter's most recent freak out. "[Alva] asked me for a raise for getting chased into the ladies room," chortles Langdon, who then says mock-seriously, "one question, Peter: is my name written anywhere on the bathroom wall, and what did it say?", which puts everyone in stitches.

¹⁸⁴ Notwithstanding Young's comment that "the psycho killer is one of Hollywood's reigning characterizations for gay men" ("Silence" 32), yuppie psychos seem impossibly heterosexual, which is more a product of their string of partners than of any true sexual desire. Sexuality seems not to figure for the yuppie any more than work does (cf. above, and The Yuppie Handbook's joke about scheduling sex).

woman the morning after: “I wanted her to disappear. I wanted her to get the hell out of there.” Glaser points out a theme she will return to, the confusion in Peter’s desire, saying “and yet, just the night before, you wanted her very badly.” This comment points to Peter’s pattern of behavior, which vacillates from desperate hunger to bored irritability. While the film satirizes yuppie psychotherapy,¹⁸⁵ Dr. Glaser does manage to diagnose Peter for the audience, even when Peter is not paying any attention. During one scene transition, we cut to her office as she is telling Peter “. . . starting with your earliest years when you somehow were taught to expect something that wasn’t even halfway attainable.” To this insight, which certainly is Loew’s primary problem, Peter looks at his watch and stands to leave. In these earlier scenes, Loew goes to therapy just as he goes to work and to the clubs; it is simply a meaningless, time-filling gesture. As we see by his other relationships, Glaser is actually the perfect woman for Peter; when he wants her to disappear, she does, unlike Jackie, who calls and leaves angry notes on his door after he twice stands her up. Later, though, although he has expressed his scorn for therapy, Loew becomes panicked when he cannot see Glaser over the weekend. Calling her to try to move his appointment earlier, Loew imagines Dr. Glaser answering the phone in a robe. As Peter, whimpering through the plastic teeth he is wearing, begs “sooner,” she is approached by a man wearing a towel, who caresses her and tells her to hurry up, in another example of Peter expecting something “that wasn’t even halfway attainable.”

Against Peter’s relationship with Dr. Glaser is his relationship with his much put-upon secretary Alva. Peter has Alva working on a pointless task--sifting through files to find an old contract from the 1960s. Alva cannot find the file, and during the film Loew

¹⁸⁵ Less so than *The Silence of the Lambs*, which presents a cannibal for a shrink, but *Vampire’s Kiss* does give us an analyst-cum-matchmaker. Dr. Glaser: a glazier or a glacier?

increasingly harasses her about it, demanding she stay after work to look for it by herself if she wants to keep her job, even though he knows “it’s a horrible, horrible job.” The next day, jumping on the desk, Loew chases her into the ladies’ room. After another scene where he mocks her gun, she stays home sick, and Loew takes a cab all the way to the Bronx to bring her back to work. After each of his outbursts, though, Loew seems genuinely apologetic; blaming his behavior on mescaline or “the pressures.” When she finally locates the contract, Peter tells her it is too late, and after chasing her through the empty building, attacks her in a manner that film critic Caryn James finds “tastelessly unfunny” (“Woman He Adores” C11). It certainly is, but what Loew’s treatment of Alva reveals is the way in which he needs her. Finding the contract, as made clear when he freaks out about it on Dr. Glaser, is such a pointless waste of time. Yet it seems to be the only thing that Peter does that week, and his single-minded pursuit of Alva as the newest employee at work contrasts with his being pursued by Rachel.

Just before attacking Alva, Loew takes her gun and shoots himself twice in the mouth. The viewer knows what he does not know, that the gun is only loaded with blanks, and so this proves it to him: “I’m a vampire, a real vampire.” Snatching the cross off of Alva’s neck, Loew imitates his vampire lover Rachel, who has momentarily exchanged places with Alva in his mind, laughing at him. Rachel provides the title’s “vampire kiss,” and she appears to Loew as a possessive, jealous lover, preventing Loew from keeping his date with Jackie and from answering a phone call: “how much nicer when the outside world doesn’t interfere with your pleasure.” Rachel, the consuming lover, soothes Peter, saying “it’s alright. You chose me.” The notion of the yuppie’s choice is portrayed ironically here; in fact Peter’s habitual, nightly “choosing” of women seems to have come back to bite him in the neck. Later, disgusted, Rachel takes his fake

teeth out, and Peter is reduced to trying to convince her that he is just like her.

The last woman that Peter meets exists solely in his imagination, when he fantasizes his final therapy session with Dr. Glaser. Finally opening up and declaring that he is ready for a change, Peter says he has in mind “love. . . but I mean real love, the sweep-me-off-my-feet, the big L. I’m not talking about fairy tale love. I’m talking about a mature relationship.” This cracks Dr. Glaser up (which infuriates Peter), until she reveals that another of her patients, Sharon, wants just the same thing. After being introduced, they discover that they share all the essential yuppie favorites--poetry, horseback riding, long weekends in the country, and “refreshing” Japanese food. As they go off, cured, to share their big romance together,¹⁸⁶ Peter seems finally to have found his perfect fantasy woman. But, as a crazed Peter approaches his brownstone, we see him shouting to an empty street, “Sharon, I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Upstairs, he imagines her harping on the same old things, “when did you become a vampire? Why couldn’t you be normal? Does this mean we can never have children?” Kicking her out, he mutters “I really can’t handle these relationships, maybe I should see a shrink.” Sharon, the perfect, doctor-approved mature relationship, turns out to be just as awful to Peter as all the others, since it breaks down just as quickly into boredom and routine.

Peter dies immediately after, staked by Emilio.¹⁸⁷ After such an ending, the problem of the viewer’s identification with or against Peter seems impossible to resolve. Curiously, this is a departure from the first scenes of the film, whose cinematography so effectively established a traditional horror approach. First is the credit sequence, with shots of New York City landmarks at dusk played against eerie music. As Peter leaves

¹⁸⁶ Dr. Glaser clears two obstacles to their future happiness, Peter’s rape and murder, by saying it was “just a little id release,” and “people get murdered every day, stop worrying.”

¹⁸⁷ Technically, Emilio murders Peter, punishing him for the rape of Alva (but not the murder of the girl at the club), but since Peter holds the stake up to his own chest, and has been begging for someone to kill him, the scene can also be read as a strange kind of assisted suicide.

the bar with his date, he says “this is my kingdom, and my palace is but two blocks from here,” at which point first-time viewers may think that Peter Loew is the titular vampire taking his victim to his castle. Next, we are given many strange, high angles, producing a voyeuristic effect; the first shots of Peter’s apartment are literally from outside his window, high up from where the bat will enter. These ceiling shots continue throughout, in Peter’s apartment, at his office, at a hotel, on the street. Even with these “bat’s-eye shots,” though, the film assiduously manages to avoid imposing a style on the proceedings. That is, if one is to read the film as a psychological narrative about yuppie insanity and vampire-obsession, then it would make no sense for the film itself to look like a vampire film. Given that Peter is not really a vampire, then this film is not really a fantasy, but rather attempts something more realistic. The “true” images we are given, then, cannot be recovered by the fantasy of the vampire genre, and, like American Psycho, the viewer has an insider/outsider problem in dealing with these yuppie psychos: are we experiencing something remote, or internal? Is this safe fantasy, or serious reality?

Unlike Blue Steel, which relies on the connection of the authority of the filmic image with the authority of the “legal” gun, Vampire’s Kiss continually throws into doubt the seen image. While we identify with Loew because we are shown scenes from his imagination (Rachel against a black background, the later imagined scenes with Dr. Glaser), his point of view is obviously problematic: first, he is a self-absorbed yuppie, and thus has misplaced values and has to go to therapy and act like a jerk; and second, it is increasingly obvious that he is “crazy.” In Vampire’s Kiss, we are denied what Eugene wants in Blue Steel; he says he wants to watch himself in the other--and we are not given an identificatory character in Vampire’s Kiss that would allow us to watch-in-reflection our yuppie protagonist. This identificatory displeasure makes the viewer’s work more

difficult; American Psycho and Vampire's Kiss are hard and ugly to read because they are both solipsistic and overly self-reflexive. Opposed to Blue Steel, these two are *acinematic*, because the necessary apparatus which would mediate between subject and object is missing or fragmented. Instead, as in Vampire's Kiss, we have only the fear of the mirror, burning us, shocking us. While we can see Loew see himself in the mirror, and he can see himself in the mirror as a yuppie, once he fulfills the film's idea of himself and becomes a vampire, his reflection becomes invisible. The mirror in Vampire's Kiss, then, replaces the cinematic codes in Blue Steel, shortcutting the yuppie's pleasure in image consumption.

George Will, writing in 1984 in the Washington Post on the ambitiousness of yuppies, argues that "many hard-charging Americans between 25 and 40 seem to combine extraordinary ambition and extraordinary insecurity. One ambition is to assuage their insecurity by means of an elaborate, all-absorbing strategy of socially correct consumption" (C7). As a guiding principle for the yuppie psycho trope, the search for socially correct consumption is one that continually veers between the cultural and the psychological. The supposed independence from their parents frees the yuppie to express desire and pleasure in new ways; yet under the banner of the yuppie, these desires are also reformulated as a problem of sociability--the yuppie distinguishes himself from other baby boomers by his taste and aesthetics, which are continually measured against other yuppies' social expressions. The yuppie creates a form of identity focused on establishing inherently unnatural relationships of consumption with other people and objects--and this is also a form of identity established by the vampire. Since their single test is one of "socially correct consumption," the yuppie, like the vampire, represents a dead space in the possibilities of ethical self-engagement in the 80s.

Chapter Five

Engaged Withdrawal: The Four Questions of Kathy Acker

“To judge from recent trends in scholarly as well as popular literature, three crucial questions can be seen to stand at the forefront of today’s preoccupations: the question of mothering, the question of the woman writer, and the question of autobiography”
(Barbara Johnson, “My Monster / My Self” 2).

As we have seen with earlier chapters, the “question of mothering” is a recurring preoccupation of both theory and literature in the 80s, and one that appears even in unlikely places. For example, the “recent trends” which Barbara Johnson refers to in 1982 are evident in a range of examples from popular literature like Brat Pack novels and films to philosophical and medico-legal wranglings over the new roles men and women should play in childbirth and child rearing. Johnson’s “My Monster / My Self,” a group review of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Nancy Friday’s My Mother / My Self (1977), and Dorothy Dinnerstein’s The Mermaid and the Minotaur (1976) in a special “Cherchez la Femme” issue of Diacritics, connects the three interrelated questions--of mothering, of the woman writer, and of autobiography--with the notion of feminine monstrosity and a certain self-preoccupation regarding women’s roles as scholarly and popular writers in a new, postmodern age. In doing so, Johnson illustrates how the question of mothering, or the “critique of the institution of parenthood” (2) which each text raises, is not an isolable question for productive feminist discourse, but rather one which ties into the questions of woman’s writing and of autobiography so that the three demonstrate a kind of joint mastering of the self-monstrosity characteristic of female autobiography (and especially

so in implicit autobiography, which none of her texts are). “In each case,” Johnson argues, “the autobiographical reflex is triggered by the resistance and ambivalence involved in the very writing of the book” (3). In each case, the woman writer cannot help but reveal how “the monstrosity of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography” (Johnson 10). Since female autobiography measures itself against a literary genre founded upon the male imagination (and upon the masculine imagination of the feminine), Johnson finds in the three texts she discusses a unique “*theory of autobiography as monstrosity*” (10) which stands out as the more fertile autobiographical act.¹⁸⁸

To the three preoccupying questions Johnson presents, I am inclined to add one more, the question of women’s history. As the theoretical landscape of the American 1980s, dominated initially by postmodernism, created such a self-conscious decade, we find not only an increased importance of the descriptive efforts of self-periodizing statements, but also a lack of examination of the proscriptive result upon the subject’s sense of his or her ethical place in this time. Renaissance historian Joan Kelly-Gadol’s seminal essay “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” (1977) challenges traditional schemes of periodization, arguing that women’s history must account for the variance between women’s and men’s experiences of seemingly shared historical periodizations that are generally only formed around important experiences in men’s lives. Kelly-Gadol finds promise in the idea that periodization has become “relational” in women’s history, and so rather than overthrow historical periodizations or write an alternate history of women’s

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter Three, “. . . *Mater sed certissima* and ‘In the Matter of Baby “M,”’” where I discuss other critics’ theorizing about late-70s and early-80s thinking about the emphasis placed on the mother. Nancy Chodorow in particular describes out how mothering itself is “reproduced,” while later critics such as Marianne Hirsch argue that “daughterly perspectives . . . collude with patriarchy in placing mothers in the position of object, of other--thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and making maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility” (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 13). In light of the opening questions of this chapter, one response is to question whether women may intentionally adopt such daughterly perspectives *in order* to keep their mothers outside of representation.

experience, she proposes that traditional periodizations be used to “relate the history of women to that of men” (“Social Relation of the Sexes” 812). Likewise, for the 80s, rather than rewrite the Reagan 80s solely from women’s perspective, we must work to draw men’s history and women’s history into a relation with each other. In these “social relations,” I find a useful pathway towards explaining 80s *self*-periodizing efforts, which focus on men’s experience as solely as a concept as “the Renaissance” does.

For instance, postmodern theory’s efforts to characterize the present by first establishing a recent epistemological break focus on only one possible experience of the present. As part of its self-periodizing work, postmodernism’s *coupure* suggests a stylistic freedom from the strictures of the past. Most often discussed initially in terms of art or architecture, before long the postmodern style became evident in the behavior and representations of 80s subjects. Since this self-periodizing is different from straight historical periodization by virtue of the speeding up of self-consciousness about the contemporary, the social relation of the sexes which Kelly-Gadol discusses is even more fraught with troubling implications for women. For example, as Nancy K. Miller points out in “The Text’s Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions,” from the same *Diacritics* issue as Johnson’s “My Monster / My Self,” there is little comfort for women in mid- to late-70s theoretical analyses of humanistic thought which resulted in the decentering “end of ‘man.’” As the 80s arrive and as European poststructuralism filters into American postmodernism, the much touted epistemological rupture cleared the table of suddenly outmoded notions of authenticity, legitimacy, and self-knowledge, but it not unintentionally also took away women’s seats. As Miller puts it, speaking of Michel Foucault’s “sovereign indifference” in asking of the concept of the author, “what matters who’s speaking?,” it matters very much: “only those who have it can play with not

having it” (“Text’s Heroine” 53). After the epistemological rupture of postmodernism, “freeing up” humanistic thought as it may have presumed to have done, we find women excluded from both playing with it and playing with not having it.

Furthermore, as such postmodern themes as blankness, flatness, superficiality, and pastiche are picked up in the Brat Pack films and novels, a whole literary industry of neo-hedonism is made possible. Stylistic freedom seems to have translated into cultural freedom as the consumeristic “age of excess” became culturally fashionable. Yet, we curiously find that virtually all Literary Brat Pack novels revolve around the rather unhedonistic figure of the mother, and set up a specific relation between the death of the mother and the supposed affectlessness of contemporary culture. The more nihilist these characters acted, the harder their mother’s deaths became. Could it be that postmodernism, as culturally represented by the Brat Pack characters, is really a theory of mourning? Is it that renegotiations of the meaning of the mother was the true, immediate reason for a shift in feeling in the 80s?

Evidence for the centrality of the mother’s role also comes from more direct legal, medical, and political attempts to redefine motherhood in the 80s. Surrogate motherhood, a “new old” technology, was pushed to extremes so that surrogacy brokers like Noel Keane could sell it. But as it coincided with the shift of emphasis from motherly perspectives to daughterly perspectives, surrogate motherhood provoked an ambivalent feminist response; who is more important: mothers, daughters, or women? Ironically, surrogate motherhood provokes in men a fear of crazy-making situations, figured as a medico-legal paternal “crisis of legitimacy” that mirrors the postmodern crisis over knowledge. In this, postmodernism’s self-periodizing hypothesis of an epistemological break may not be much more than a mask for masculine anxiety over technological

changes rendering them less biologically necessary.

As the questions of mothering, of the woman writer, of autobiography, and of women's history come to preoccupy both women's and men's concerns with the self-consciously novel 80s, it is apparent that the "objects of knowledge" which organize this dissertation and which provided stylish warnings to 80s subjects are insufficient alone to represent a kind of self-periodization of the 80s. That is, while these objects of knowledge were not intended to be solely representative of lived modes of 80s subjectivity, they also fail to account individually for a form of 80s subjectivity which deals with the self-periodized 80s in a manner that is neither only resistant nor only receptive. If I am right in arguing the primacy of postmodernism on the *cultural* landscape of the 80s, then I have thus far only discussed "objects of knowledge" which stand in an either optimistic or pessimistic relation to this primacy. I would like to put together the four questions we began with to show how the ambivalence and resistance involved in women's writing, which Johnson sees as provoking an impulse to feminine autobiography, represents another fruitful model for 80s subjectivity. Like Johnson, I find the monstrosity of selfhood an expression characterized by a sort of paradoxically committed ambivalence. I term the conscious execution of this strategy "engaged withdrawal." The point of historical periodization (or in the case of this project, the periodization of a self-periodization) must be to address the contemporary moment. The difficulty of writing about the 80s is that it feels so much like the present moment, despite our own contemporary attempts to distance ourselves from the past. The 1980s is situated between a post-68 moment of shared political activity and engagement and a 21st century problem with political mobilization and ethical engagement, and the self-consciousness of self-periodization and the ethical dimensions of self-behavior and self-

knowledge in that decade suggest a more elusive strategy of engaged withdrawal. This engaged withdrawal provides a paradoxical model of political, artistic, and ethical activity that stands outside of postmodernism's dividing rupture. After briefly glossing the historical placement of the model of engaged withdrawal, I want to connect it with the four questions (of mothering, of the woman writer, of autobiography, and of women's history), in the context of Kathy Acker's novels.

II. Engaged Withdrawal

By engaged withdrawal I mean a subject's paradoxically present absence in culture. Situated historically, this theme is not new to the 1980s. The Greek philosopher Epicurus' early third-century B.C.E. dictum "live unseen" and Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's sixth-century B.C.E.¹⁸⁹ advice to "do that which consists in taking no action" both revolve around the question of the individual's proper role in society. Epicurus' philosophical school, dubbed The Garden, was notorious for accepting women and slaves as students, and this notoriety was in part responsible for misreadings of Epicurus' promotion of pleasure as the goal of life as purely hedonistic and amoral. Actually, Epicurus defines pleasure by gauging it against the removal of pain, raising more problems in regulating moral and social activity than in regulating individual, bodily pleasures. Epicurus' thought, while an individualistic philosophy focused on self-sufficiency, also goes to lengths to stress the value of friendship and community. In doing so, Epicurus relies on a relative notion of social justice, which changes depending upon changing circumstances. In disavowing moral absolutes (and, in particular, the action of gods), Epicurus introduces the idea of the *socius*, or social self, which will later become so consuming to Romans, Christians, and other social forms analyzed by Foucault.

¹⁸⁹ Modern scholars differ, dating *Tao Te Ching* to the late fourth- or early third-century B.C.E.

Likewise, Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, which stresses the individual subject's recognition of the passivity of action, also fundamentally questions the importance of self-knowledge, strength, and control as it relates to an individual's behavior among others. Relying as Epicurus does on evidence from the natural world, Lao Tzu juxtaposes the fruitless vanity of human endeavor to control one's surroundings with metaphors from nature to illustrate an underlying "action of nonaction" linked to a feminine principle. Lao Tzu's text are often consigned, by the tradition of European philosophy, to religious mysticism; yet, while there is not space to do so here, Lao Tzu's reaction to Confucianism (as well as Epicurus' atomistic reaction to Plato's theory of forms) deserves to be brought into dialogue with a post-Cartesian conception of philosophy and sexual difference.

Both texts, in recognizing the mutuality of opposites, in a way presage poststructuralist critiques of Western metaphysical dualities.¹⁹⁰ Yet, these examples have not been taken advantage of to describe or provide models for postwar, American ethical behavior. To turn to one of these dualities, engagement versus withdrawal, or social activity versus passivity, in the post-68 period, as theorists and critics questioned and complicated the relationship between theory and art, thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre proposed a newer, more politically engaged form of literature that serves as a touchstone for literature after the radical negativity of surrealism. As he explains in What is Literature? (1949), Sartre's *littérature engagée*, or "engaged literature," was intended to "take up a position *in our literature*, because literature is in essence a taking of position" (278). Even more dramatically, "literature throws you into battle. Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged, willy-nilly" (What Is 65). This may be one way of stressing self-consciousness in the ethical act of literature,

¹⁹⁰ One reference here is to Jacques Derrida's often reprinted essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" which, in arguing that "the center is not the center," returns us to Lao Tzu's observation that a spoked wheel is only useful due to the emptiness around the center.

and in a difficult sentence, Sartre imagines the engaged writer as a mediator: “I shall say that a writer is engaged when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the engagement of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective” (What Is 76). “His engagement is mediation,” (What Is 76) Sartre concludes, and it becomes clear that engaged literature is for Sartre more a function of the author than the text; the author should attempt to summon “the most complete consciousness of being embarked” (*la conscience . . . la plus entière d’être embarqué*), in order to render clear and lucid what may be hidden--that literature is always already a taking of a theoretical position, and thus it is an ethical form related to the writer’s and reader’s struggle for freedom. As a theoretical formulation of the proper role of literature in a politically active life, Sartre’s argument demonstrated postwar concerns about the nihilism or affectlessness of contemporary culture. Furthermore, he responds to a philosophical tradition, stemming from Nietzsche and Heidegger, of figuring the individual in the world; Sartre’s early novel Nausea (1938), for instance, dramatizes a man’s horror at the monstrous excessiveness of his existence. “There was no half-way house between non-existence and this floating abundance. If you existed, you had to *exist all the way*” (Nausea 128). This feeling about the world, which the narrator Roquentin calls nausea, becomes synonymous with the narrator’s feeling about himself: “I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I” (Nausea 126). The narrator’s problem is how to come to terms with this feeling, and up until the last page Roquentin “dare[s] not make a decision” (Nausea 178). Sartre’s later emphasis on political commitment responds in a way to these indecisions. Yet, for me such a decidedly engaged stance only recirculates the potential for un-engaged activity. Implicit to a theory of art as a political act is a whole host of

associated acts; engaged literature, for example, presents such terms as activity, control, commitment, strength, and the hortatory as positive values for art. That these values often collude with masculine, nationalistic, aggressive, or rationalistic values is troubling. Sartre's response to his concept "nausea" responds in turn to all those other European malaises which have structured the individual's experience with the limits of art: *la noia* (or "boredom," the title of Alberto Moravia's 1960 novel about a young and an old artist), anomie (as in Albert Camus's The Stranger [1942]), decadence (Huysman's Against Nature [1884]), *ennui* (Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du mal [1857] or Paris Spleen [1867]), and melancholia (as in Freud's paper [1917], Keats' Ode [1820], or Burton's Anatomy [1621]).

Before Sartre's *littérature engagée*, there is an earlier American literary example of the question of writerly and readerly engagement and withdrawal. Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall-Street" (1853) centers on the central, enigmatic figure of Bartleby. The story is narrated after the fact by an unnamed lawyer who had hired Bartleby to work in his office. Bartleby, asked to do a number of different tasks, responds to each by saying "I would prefer not to." As the narrator becomes increasingly frustrated with his new employee, Bartleby moves further into himself. After the narrator moves his law office to escape Bartleby's presence, Bartleby is put into jail, where he finally dies, presumably since he "would prefer not to" eat. From the outset, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is an impossible tale since the narrator emphasizes the inscrutability of Bartleby but nonetheless endeavors to pin him down--if Bartleby is mysterious to the narrator, he is doubly so to the reader who must wade through the narrator's own confused account of Bartleby's life. Accounting for solemn and ghostly figure of Bartleby ultimately means accounting for Bartleby's repeated "I would prefer

not to”; trying to read this speech, which veers between engagement and withdrawal without ever addressing either, leads the narrator as well as the reader to some obscure middle ground of ambivalence. Interestingly, two poststructuralist thinkers have taken up “Bartleby, the Scrivener” to explain postwar, ethical reading practices and the level of engagement the reader has with a text. J. Hillis Miller, in Versions of Pygmalion, reads Melville’s short story as another version of the Pygmalion myth, where there is “a character who does something like falling in love with a statue,” and where “reading makes something happen” (vii, viii). In Bartleby’s case, Miller focuses on the narrator’s ethical responsibility towards Bartleby, which Miller links with the narrator’s unsuccessful attempts to write Bartleby’s biography. In Miller’s reading, the tale is really of the narrator, and Galatea-like Bartleby turns out to be the sculptor Pygmalion as well, a “mute bust of Cicero . . . whose silence reduces the one who addresses it to silence too” (149-150), turning both the narrator and the reader slowly to stone. In its focus on the “doubling” of conscience/ethics in the narrator/reader, Miller’s evaluation of Bartleby recalls Freud’s notion of the uncanny in freezing the reader. The effect of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is to demonstrate the author’s play with literature and ethical engagement--in Sartre’s terms we have the “consciousness of being embarked,” but Miller demonstrates that this embarkation serves mainly to turn around upon itself. Gilles Deleuze, in Essays Critical and Clinical, takes Bartleby as a symptomatological model to express a relationship between literature and life, between the critical and clinical. Much as he did with his study of Sade and Masoch, Deleuze works to extract from literature a set of signs to describe life. In a kind of “Bartleby-criticism,” Deleuze elucidates this character’s “being as being, and nothing more” (“Bartleby” 71). In this reading, Bartleby’s catchphrase formula “is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as

mercilessly as any nonpreferred” (“Bartleby” 71). In doing this, Bartleby’s “formula” (which Deleuze distinguishes from a “Procedure” with which to treat language) “ravages language” and “make[s] the whole [of it] confront silence” (Deleuze, “Bartleby” 73, 72). Like Miller, Deleuze refers to speech act theory, upon which the narrator is dependent in attempting to place Bartleby, and which Bartleby’s formula destroys. In this, Deleuze finds that Bartleby, “even in his catatonic or anorexic state . . . is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America” (“Bartleby” 90). Unlike Sartre’s committed intellectual, though, in “Bartleby” we have a series of engagements and withdrawals, moving outwards from Bartleby’s phrase to the reader, passing through the character, the narrator, the text, and the author.

It is not until the 1990s that there was an identifiable American response of sorts to Sartre’s call for engaged literature. In the early 1990s, popular authors and filmmakers cultivated what was known popularly as a Generation X “slacker” culture. Douglas Coupland’s novel Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (1991) gave a name to this shift in feeling, and early independent American cinema, such as Richard Linklater’s Slacker (1991) and Kevin Smith’s Clerks (1994), provided a kind of social realism of bored, aimless, post-80s “twentysomethings” (a label which “Generation X” replaced). These characters were like rebels with neither cause nor any real rebellion. Coupland’s novel is laced with kitschy Pop Art cartoons, with a glossary of terms such as “McJob,” “Knee Jerk Irony,” and “Legislated Nostalgia,” and with meaningless, bumper-sticker like mantras such as “SOIL ISN’T A DOCUMENT” and “REINVENT THE MIDDLE CLASS.” These last are similar in typography and bluntness to Barbara Kruger’s art, yet there is no irony here, or at least no ironic commentary on an image or other text. Rather, spread through slacker culture is the attempt to shore up the fragments of recent

American history (of the Cold War variety) against the ruin of the global culture of the 90s. The question for the 80s, then, as it falls between different, transatlantic breeds of anomie--Sartre's engagement on the one hand and Gen X's withdrawal on the other-- is whether the later wholesale slackening of political and social engagement is a continuation of or a response to the culture of the 80s. Were the 80s the beginnings of the slacker's shrug to European, post-68 ideas of political activity, or is the feeling of Generation X a product of the failure of the American 80s to integrate such ideas successfully?

As I have argued earlier, as far as postmodernism goes, "slacker" culture is clearly a natural outgrowth of the supposed affectless of the postmodern condition. In his 1984 foreword to Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition, Fredric Jameson writes of the then-current "rich and creative moment, of the greatest aesthetic play and delight" which has two central features: "the falling away of the protopolitical vocation and the terrorist stance of the older modernism [and] the eclipse of all of the affect (depth, anxiety, terror, the emotions of the monumental) that marked high modernism" (Foreword xviii). This affect is replaced by Coleridge's "fancy," Schiller's "aesthetic play," and what Jameson summarizes as "a commitment to surface and to the *superficial* in all the senses of the word" (Foreword xviii). One supposes that this is commitment of a sort, yet still I wonder about the effects of a "commitment to surface" which intends to eclipse affect, and in particular how the emphasis on aesthetics and aesthetic play willingly reduces emotions and affects which are then made to seem unseemly. This is, Jameson continues, "the moment in which aesthetics gives way to ethics, in which the problem of the postmodern . . . becomes that of one's more fundamental attitude toward the new social formation" (Foreword xviii). Presumably, the kind of ethical response--the "fundamental attitude" one would have--would be as superficial as the thing it responds to. That is,

confronted with the superficial, in how ever many senses there are, we find either reception or resistance, neither of which is going to be successful, since both are reactive. Or, perhaps there is some middle ground between the two, as in Linda Hutcheon's "complicitous critique" or Judith Fetterley's "resisting reader." Yet, I am not sure of these either; poststructuralism (and for that matter, Taoism) points towards a certain "complicitous critique" as being a feature of all objects. More so, in combining reception and resistance, a phrase like "complicitous critique" retains both engagement and withdrawal wholesale, and only by juxtaposition is it able to ironize one or the other. Is it possible to have neither one nor the other, nor both, but rather neither?

Luckily, the idea of the avant-garde, of the terrorist, of anxiety that Jameson saw eclipsed with postmodernism did survive in the 80s, and furthermore did so by playing with the notion of "aesthetic play" instead of considering the superficial and the deep as mutually exclusive characteristics of art. Kathy Acker is the most important figure in this respect, and before examining her work specifically, I want to turn to another woman writer, Hannah Arendt, whom Acker employs as an example of the kind of ambivalently engaged political and artistic activity that can stand apart from depictions of the postmodern age as affectless and superficial. In her 1995 address to the Authors Guild, "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age," Acker considers authorship and copyright in light of her practice of textual appropriation; in this case, Acker borrows from Arendt's Men in Dark Times (1968), looking pessimistically (as Acker was wont to do) at the way Arendt's "thinking is deeply embedded in the historical" (98). "Perhaps this is how literature works," Acker proposes, and then quotes Arendt on the writers she examines who "have ventured into the public life":

I am afraid that in their efforts, they felt very little responsibility toward the

world; these efforts were, rather, guided by their hope of preserving some minimum of humanity in a world grown inhuman while at the same time as far as possible resisting the weird irreality of this worldlessness--each after his own fashion and some few by seeking to the limits of their ability to understand even inhumanity and the political and intellectual monstrosities of a time out of joint.

(Arendt qtd. in Acker, "Writing, Identity" 98-99)

The themes that we began with are here: expectations of responsibility, the private and public author and the world, literature's possible resistance to a resisting world, understanding inhumanity, the capacity for intellectual monstrosity, and the historical. Acker finds community with Arendt since they both share a concern with the author's ethical responsibility to her culture--to finding a response to help mitigate the feeling one of Acker's characters has, that "all are grasping for good reason in these desperate times" (Great 123).

Hannah Arendt is a product of dark and desperate times, as is Kathy Acker. In an earlier essay, Acker reflects on New York City in 1979, imagining that "if my friends and our society didn't find a way for adequate change, we would die and quickly. . . . I wanted radical change, however it had to come. At the same time I was aware that writing changes nothing on the larger political scale" ("A Few Notes" 7). What then is one to do, Acker asks, with the hardships of history; how is a writer, a woman writer, to write change if writing is not change? In answer, Acker later takes up Arendt's term "a committed act," whose meaning is "revealed only when the action itself has come to an end," that is, when it becomes narratable ("Writing, Identity" 100). "Insofar as any *mastery* of the past is possible," Acker quotes Arendt, "it consists in relating what has happened" ("Writing, Identity" 100). Now, Acker explains, Arendt does not here mean

“master narratives” of the kind Lyotard investigated in the postmodern context, but rather Acker proposes a subtle distinction between a “writing, narration” which does nothing and a “narration, writing” which is a moving language and which “restores meaning to a world which hardship and suffering have revealed as chaotic and senseless” (“Writing, Identity” 100). But what of the case, Acker writes, of *really* dark times? “How can we, as Hannah Arendt says, even in worlds that seem to have become inhuman, remain obligated to these worlds?” (“Writing, Identity” 102). Acker finds Arendt’s answer: “‘Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored.’ *Flight* does not mean *abandonment*” (“Writing, Identity” 103). The restoration of meaning to the world by means of “narration, writing,” in which narrative (as we shall see, a nonlinear, noncircular narrative) comes over “just writing,” allows for a kind of fleeing from the world which is not abandonment, which is justified or justifiable. “*Flight* does not mean *abandonment*”; between these two terms there is one way out that is also a way in.

III. On Kathy Acker

“The whole world and consciousness revolve around my mother” (Kathy Acker, Great Expectations 14)

Let us begin at the end; of Melville’s scrivener, J. Hillis Miller tells us that “‘Death’ is a catachresis for what can never be named properly” (144). Kathy Acker died 30 November 1997 in Tijuana, Mexico of breast cancer; she had been told she had a week to live, her age at death is listed by newspapers variously as 52, 50, 48, 53. Her obituarists do their duty in making some sense of the details, but like Melville’s narrator

they do so with difficulty, as we realize that “throughout her life’s work, Acker retold the story of her life” (Scholder, “Kathy Acker,” n.p.). Kathy Acker’s biography is still unwritten, an absence compounded by conflicting stories, gossips, slanders, and fictions. When alive, her obituarists tell us, her “arresting image, relentless outsider status, and provocative reading style” “was a publicist’s dream: tattooed, motorbike-loving, her publicity picture by the feted Robert Mapplethorpe” (Scholder, “Preface” vii; Lockerbie 18). Or, perhaps she was not like that all, but rather a gentle “sipper of herbal teas” (Vulliamy 1), a nature lover (Rose E5) (especially of birds [Pulsifer 13]), “in the flesh . . . not scary at all” (Moore 19), “with her glasses on . . . straight out of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie” (Times 17).¹⁹¹ Or, perhaps a reading which tries to take both images into account: “the tattoos, piercings, muscles and motorcycles were simply private pursuits and public window-dressing. . . . [She was] far more complex than the standard reductionist ‘underground sex queen’ clichés” (Murray 18). Her life’s work as well misunderstood, or multiply understood: she was a “queen of underground erotic writing” (Vulliamy 3) who “wrote graphically about sex and violence” (Moore 19), “unashamedly made plagiarism part of the basis of her writing” (Lockerbie 18), was “fascinated by language and its relation to power and to the body” (Guttridge 21), and detailed “sexual violence and the exploitation of women, all set to searing punk rhythms--and without a hint of self-indulgence” (Hoekstra 35). As evidenced by such self-indulgent hyperbole, Acker’s critics were stuck in trying to present her as unpresentable: a “Showy Queen of the Underground,” as the London Times obituary titles her (“Showy Queen” 17), Kathy Acker is a female Orpheus obscured and clarified, a poet paradoxically on display and

¹⁹¹ Jeanette Winterson, in Essential Acker, says something similar: “I have seen her in her piercings and leopardskin, suddenly put on her reading glasses and look exactly like perfect casting for The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie” (vii). Although not the case with Winterson, sadly Acker’s breast cancer often appears in sentences that try to re-feminize her, to find a vulnerable truth behind the “in-your-face” image (cf. Vulliamy 3).

hidden.¹⁹² The contrariness of Acker's obituaries marks an interesting kind of necro-biography of an author whose texts are bound up with the four questions--of mothering, of the woman writer, of autobiography, and of women's history--that we began with. As Barbara Johnson argued, "the monstrosity of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography" (10), and the representations and misrepresentations of Acker's life's work in her obituaries make, for the woman writer, the question of autobiography even more relevant.

Despite the disagreement over some of the biographical facts of Acker's life and the proper interpretation of her "showy" yet "underground" persona, everyone agrees that her texts are in some manner inextricably bound up with her own personal experience. Arguing that "Acker retold the story of her life," Amy Scholder, Acker's friend and publisher of Verso, addresses some of this confusion; there is in Acker's novels a literal question of autobiography, as one is never sure if events in her texts are "real" or "fake." Acker's life's work self-evidently rhymes with her life; in addition to copying other authors' texts, "she also copied out her own life, in a relentlessly repetitive process of transcription that called every received idea about literary value into question" (Dick 111). "Her art--while not as autobiographical as some thought--was completely intertwined with the way she lived" (Rose E5). Critics later cite her interview with Sylvère Lotringer to explain; Acker was taught (by David Antin, although she claims not to remember who it was) that writers wrote from their experience, and so when Acker was too young to have any good experiences, she simply copied others'. The textual practice remained; mixing fake and real life, she describes how she "looked for a voice, a self. I placed 'true' autobiography next to 'false' autobiography" ("A Few Notes" 10).

¹⁹² Is this not how Freud defines the *unheimlich*, which Barbara Johnson in "My Monster / My Self" suggests is limited to men and is repressed in a gesture of "feminine contradiction," a repressed gesture that exhibits "the possibility that for women as well as men the home can be the very site of the *unheimlich*" (10)?

Her friend and lover Peter Wollen reads this practice as formulating a multiple, demonic identity, constantly “decomposing the identity of the heroine” (“Kathy Acker” 10), since for Acker “a split identity was a more viable way in the world” than a static, coherent one (Acker, “Devoured” 7). Author Robert Glück takes it from the other, readerly side, writing that “she manipulates my urge to build a reality behind an I” (49). The “I” behind which Acker hides or behind which Glück wants to find a reality constitutes the moment of performance in Acker’s texts. Acker’s “I,” “the linguistic index of identity” (Wollen, “Kathy Acker” 9) raises together the question of autobiography and the problem of the pronoun--the first thing Acker’s reader must learn is that the “I” is unstable, and that it repeatedly cycles through the antinomies of identity--male/female, sadist/masochist, human/animal/robot, free/imprisoned. With this multiple “I,” it is absolutely true that Acker “constantly rejected being for becoming” (Wollen, “Kathy Acker” 2). The next problem, though, is whether the reader is meant to perform this becoming with Acker; to the question of autobiography, is the shifting “I” the author’s answer or the reader’s?

Despite the multiple, reiterative possibilities of the intertextual identity of Acker’s characters, joined together as they are by the first person pronoun, there is, *intra-textually*, a much fewer number of recurring modes or roles. While Acker’s character’s names and identities shift, the obsessive return to echoing narratives of rape, incest, pirates, a mother’s suicide, sex shows in Times Square, or tattooing curiously help anchor a reader of Acker’s 80s novels, and in their repetitiveness these narrative reoccurrences also suggest the “true” moments of Acker’s autobiographical writing. Of these, a child’s moment with a mother is the one most often repeated: Great Expectations (1982) begins and ends with it, Don Quixote’s (1986) crazy-making abortion propels that text’s search for feminine love, and Empire of the Senseless (1988) opens with a narration of Abhor’s

matrilineal horror story. Peter Wollen suggests that the suicide of Acker's mother Clare when Acker was 30 may have been "the most emotionally painful event of her life," and her texts reflect this pain, repeatedly putting the narratorial "I" into the role of an abandoned, traumatized orphan. In Great Expectations, the most ambivalent and disconcerting of the novels regarding the mother, Acker rewrites her mother's suicide and funeral three times--structurally introducing, dividing, and closing the novel with it (Great 5, 63, 127). Such preoccupations pile up, sticking out within what is an otherwise disorienting experimental voice, and these repeated moments, acting as textual markers, ask to be read as confused but proud repetitions of moments out of Acker's "true" autobiography. This is true of the mother's suicide, of Acker working in strip shows, of her getting tattooed; so what is the reader to assume except that Acker cannot help but be an autobiographical writer, practicing a novelistic confession in order to manage the emotional and traumatic pain of her mother's suicide?¹⁹³ Or, perhaps, returning to Acker's tough punk image, we could conclude, as Barbara Kruger did, that Acker was a nihilist, that she was not nearly as fragile as others suggested--a claim refuted, perhaps, by the sole fact that her confession about the importance of her mother comes tumbling out over and over again in each of her novels. Again, the question of autobiography, of the mother, and of the woman writer: Acker's traumatized orphan role is the obverse of her "outlaw heroine" persona; like the tattooed and pierced punk, as the scared orphan Acker is "both flaunting her independence, defying her oppressors and bolting in desperation, abject and humiliated" (Wollen, "Kathy Acker" 8).

Other critics make sense of Acker's traumatized orphan role in a number of productive ways. First is to read it as an autobiographical performance from her own life,

¹⁹³ Or, as Barbara Johnson said of the three writers she examined, "the autobiographical reflex is triggered by the resistance and ambivalence involved in the very writing of the book" (3).

a way of getting through the “task work”¹⁹⁴ of writing, of using the one text-worthy experience Acker does have. Another reading is suggested by Carla Harryman, author and friend of Acker, who discusses Acker’s repetitive narratives in light of a reading of the myth of Echo, pointing out that prior to Echo’s “language atrophy is her excessive talkativeness,” which Acker shared (both in her texts and her life) (40). Harryman argues that “this revisiting of subject matter involves a pleasure the reader can associate with a kind of talkativeness that serves as a bridge to pre-traumatic feelings” (40). The obsessive retelling of family dramas in particular is a kind of recovery; while Acker’s echoing language is itself a “tragic signal or sign of trauma” (Harryman 40), it is also a way to return to a disorganized, pretraumatic moment, to return to a morcellated body in psychoanalytic terms. Many others likewise comment on the “un-formed” childishness of Acker’s texts,¹⁹⁵ which enact childhood trauma while also gesturing towards the linguistic and psychoanalytic state that precedes ego organization. Narrative fiction, like ego boundaries, are confining structures, and Acker’s childish words and her fluid narratorial “I” can be read as strategies to lose these ego boundaries and thus escape the confinements of the self. Robert Glück asks “if texts and selves are prisons, would it be too fanciful to find a kind of freedom in the non-space between texts, in the silence and emptiness between juxtapositions?” (48).¹⁹⁶ Glück and Harryman are both able to make sense of the question of Acker’s autobiographical elements and her “un-formed” narrative identity by teasing out the implications of her regressive, childish diction and subject matter. As a form of language practice (as opposed to an organizing, narrative practice), I connect Acker’s textual role as a traumatized orphan with what Harryman refers to as

¹⁹⁴ Acker says of her early texts that “I really didn’t want any creativity. It was task work, and that’s how I thought of it” (“Devoured” 8).

¹⁹⁵ “Acker Un-Formed” is the title of Harryman’s contribution to the *Lust for Life* collection.

¹⁹⁶ I am reminded of Foucault’s formula “se déprendre de soi-même,” to release oneself from one self. Acker’s work similarly considers, in her terms, “the need for narrative and the simultaneous need to escape the prison-house of the story--to misquote” (*Bodies of Work* x).

“the ventriloquy of childhood” (37).

I would argue that part of this “ventriloquy of childhood,” whose textual effects are often humiliating and frightful, is what led Kruger to complain about Acker’s nihilism. Peter Wollen summarizes Kruger’s parodying of Acker in the art journal ZG: Acker is, from Kruger’s perspective, “a nihilist, rather than a critic. No engagement. Nonsense. Nothing. . . . In the end, it all boils down to baby talk, to unbearable nonsense: ‘Goo goo’” (Wollen, “Kathy Acker” 1-2). Likewise, the West German government’s Federal Inspection Office for Publications Harmful to Minors decides that Blood and Guts in High School (1984) was immoral, “for the vast part it consists of individual words, mostly childish blabber that doesn’t make any sense” (“Immoral” 143). In truth, Acker is much more conscious about this kind of refusal of adulthood and relishing of adolescence. For instance, in the essay “A Few Notes on Two of My Books,” which I mentioned above in the context of Hannah Arendt and the possibility of writing political change, Acker imagines a new phase in her work and in society--a “post-cynical” phase which has “no more need to deconstruct, to take apart perceptual habits, to reveal the frauds” (11). Instead, “we now have to find somewhere to go, a belief, a myth,” and in a telling example, she uses the film Rebel Without a Cause (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955) as a touchstone; in the American 80s, as in the American 50s, “the kids are desperately looking for a place so they can live” (“A Few Notes” 11). James Dean, Marlon Brando, these were icons because they were misunderstood by the older generation. In the 50s, the idea of teenagers was being invented, and in the 80s, Acker ventriloquies this concept. As she does, the desperation of this myth comes across. “The only reaction against an unbearable society is equally unbearable nonsense,” (“Realism” 18) Acker often says, and she also often says just how unbearable American society in the 80s is; indeed, she

writes, “the United States resembles a giant baby, perhaps mongoloid . . . who not maliciously but unknowingly breaks everything it meets as it crawls around in chaotic paths” (“William Burroughs’s” 1). She then gives us Piaget’s view of babies, who are unable to distinguish themselves from the external world. This is, for Acker, the way America looks now, and in this sense her works are neither nihilistic nor political, but more simply in the tradition of realism. Nayland Blake, an artist and friend of Acker’s, remarks that

the seventies were a time when the obscene was the last refuge of the sane. A bloated culture made by corporations paraded itself everywhere as common sense and sensual bliss at the same time. Collective political action had collapsed into a morass of ‘self’ cultivation that blinded people to the extent of their oppression.

(100)

Coming out of the 50s, the teen who held onto the myth of a rebel without a cause had it suddenly deconstructed for her. In the 70s and 80s, as this work proceeded, the efficacy contained in the notion of the collective split into the what Blake ironizes as the “self.” Now what, Acker and that 50s teen, asks? The nihilistic childishness of her texts, or rather the artistic “ventriloquy of childhood,” of Acker’s texts performs a nostalgia for the pre-“post-cynical” phase. We have returned to the mythic possibilities of the 50s, but without either naive innocence or the artistic task of revealing the naivete of earlier periods.

Yet, we find in this ventriloquy of childhood that these things are true not only of reading Acker’s life work and her essays on political activity, but also of reading Acker’s life. Acker’s relationship with her mother, gleaned from interviews and obituaries, is rather confusing, and at least two of her obituarists unintentionally connect the question

of mothering with the question of autobiography. For instance, Peter Guttridge, writing in The Independent, tells us:

Her mother committed suicide when Acker was 30. After years of silence, they had begun to see each other again four years before. But then her mother lost all her money. She couldn't cope with impoverishment. Her mother's death features in most of Acker's novels, most particularly in My Mother: Demonology (1993). Acker always contended the bits about her mother were the only autobiographical parts of her books. (21)

What is interesting is how Acker's first-person pronoun, confusingly representing both the real and the fake autobiographical voice in her novels, is replaced in her obituaries by the third-person feminine pronoun, which just as confusingly represents both Kathy and Kathy's mother Clare. "But then her mother lost all her money"--does Guttridge mean that Clare lost all of Kathy's money, or that Clare lost all of Clare's money? "She couldn't cope with impoverishment"--is this Kathy or Clare who couldn't cope with poverty, or perhaps the two together? Just as Acker performs a pronomial shift in "I's in her texts so that she may continually reconstruct the traumatized orphan persona, so do her obituarists unintentionally perform a similar shift in "her's--her mother/her money, Kathy/Clare. As Guttridge, and so many others point out, these "bits about her mother" are the most (if not the only) autobiographical elements, and so I wonder why there is a pronomial lapse where one would otherwise (in the necro-biography of the obituary) expect factual precision.

This confusion is repeated elsewhere; Gary Pulsifer, in The Guardian, writes, She never met her natural father, who deserted her mother when she was three months pregnant with Kathy. Kathy's mother appeared to have blamed her

daughter for this act of betrayal; in later life she undertook acts of petty thievery; by Acker's 30th birthday her mother at last managed to kill herself--a subject the budding novelist turned to time and again. (13)

Again, we are left to ask, who is the "she" who was also a petty thief? As in Guttridge's obituary, we see Pulsifer follow a pronomial confusion between mother and daughter with a claim about the importance of the mother to the daughter and with a gossipy detail about family money. Both Guttridge and Pulsifer, in creating such confusions between the two women, make an identification that Acker perhaps also worked towards. In this case, Pulsifer makes it sound as if the mother's death is merely good source material for Acker; she (Clare) "at last managed" to suicide so that she (Kathy) could indefinitely rewrite this act as a fiction. The mother's suicide, happening in time for Acker's 30th birthday, becomes generative for the "budding" novelist. This kind of cause and effect apparently works for the mother as well; Pulsifer's semicolons connect the two women in a circle--the circumstances of Kathy's birth caused Clare to hate her (Kathy, and Clare?), which caused "petty" family dramas which led Clare to suicide, which caused Kathy to write.

These two obituarists also, contrary to Acker's impoverished bohemian performance (for instance, Acker reports that her first marriage came about because she was disowned), raise the fact that Acker's family was in fact wealthy, and in doing so Guttridge and Pulsifer also bring together the issue of money and the issue of the mother. In "Simulating Sex and Imagining Mothers," critic Colleen Kennedy, considering the simulation of pornography in Acker and Catherine Texier's work, makes use of Luce Irigaray's argument that women are "products" that men exchange: "How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in

general? Commodities, as we all know, do not take themselves to market” (Irigaray qtd. in Kennedy 177). Kennedy argues that “in a sense, Acker does take herself to market,” in that she puts herself into her fictions such that she becomes “a fiction herself” (177). Examining Pulsifer and Guttridge’s obituaries in this light, it is fascinating how clearly the economic and maternal dimensions of this fiction-making collude to produce a reading of Acker’s autobiographical predilections. “Her mother lost all her money,” “in later life she undertook acts of petty thievery”--if this is Kathy and not Clare, then perhaps we are suggesting that what Acker thieved were really the “bits about her mother.” The question of the woman writer who economizes herself in an effort to become subject and object¹⁹⁷ is disrupted in Acker’s case by her questionable relationship with her mother, both pronomial and monetary.

Clearly Acker was writing about mothers--autobiographically about her mother--all along, and later, after the 80s, Acker works to figure out for herself what has been clear to her readers: “the more that I write my own novels, the more it seems to me that to write is to read” (“Reading the Lack” 66). This is what sympathetic critics mean when they say Acker practices “appropriation” and what ironic critics mean when they call her a “plagiarist.” Robert Glück writes that “the already-known is a public stage on which to reclaim emotion” (53). Acker’s writing, performing in the space between affect and event, becomes clearer as she writes, although her specific themes also shift and mutate as she reclaims emotion. Considering Acker’s 80s novels, as a reader I am struck by how unselfconsciously they perform the traumatized orphan role and the question of mothering. The question of Acker’s “autobiographical” or “appropriative” style is telling when reviewers struggle to deal with someone with such “relentless outsider status”

¹⁹⁷ Like Barbara Kruger, Susanne Kappeler, and Luce Irigaray, “Acker finds herself, as a woman writing, simultaneously object and subject--never completely subject because always object” (Kennedy 176-7).

(Scholder, "Preface" vii). It is easy to see the fumbling phrases invented to both marginalize and to center Acker. My own difficulty seems to be a product of my uncertainty about the honesty of Acker's voice--my difficulty with reading a 30-year-old's "ventriloquy of childhood," which I both desire and resist reading as a merely confessional or restorative act. Acker the author may "reclaim emotion" by such practices, but what of the reader? And what of the questions of the woman writer and of autobiography, occupying as they do an ethical space between the public and the private? If this is what Acker worked at her whole career--the refusal to separate fictions and identity--we must wonder why it is later necessary for her to replicate this distinction between her own life and the myths of her own life and her fictions.

For example, the first lines of the opening subsection, "I Recall My Childhood," of Great Expectations, the most forthrightly maternal of Acker's early novels:

My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter. So I called myself Peter, and came to be called Peter.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister--Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith.

On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed suicide and in September of 1979 my grandmother (on my mother's side) died. Ten days ago (it is now almost Christmas 1979) Terence told my fortune with the Tarot cards. (5)

The offhandedly private confession on the first page, the disarmingly practiced and concise flow of this disclosure, and the matter-of-fact parenthetical details confuse the I's role as recaller. "I Recall My Childhood" is part of "Plagiarism," the first of three longer

sections that divides the novel,¹⁹⁸ we have just jumped headlong from a short parody of Dickens into something much more serious and personal. Indeed, while Acker's section heading labels her use of Dickens as plagiarism, she modifies the original, jokingly substituting the more difficult name "Peter" for Dickens's "Pip." She also leaves out the word "family" in the first sentence; Dickens's text begins "My father's family name being Pirrip" (Dickens 1). A question of textual scholarship, perhaps (Acker does correct this in her second paragraph: "I give Pirrip as my father's family name"), but there is a not insignificant difference in Acker's oeuvre between the "father's family name" and the "father's name." Such practical observations, mingling with the functionality of Peter's confession of his mother's suicide, forces an effort of will to recall that dictum of reading which asks us to remember that authors are not characters, and in fact may be people in their own right. As Acker puts it, "when I'm writing I become the characters in the novel, but the characters in the novel aren't me. People always think they're me, and it's a drag" ("Devoured" 20). And so by shifting dramatically between plagiarism and confession, Acker of course invites a connection between the author's and Peter's person, a connection not unaided by a similarity in the dates of Peter's mother's suicide and Clare's.

What makes this passage troublesome is not only Acker's narrative strategy, with its rapid jumps from narrative moment to narrative moment, but also the paradoxically clear, straightforward voice, a concrete example of the "ventriloquy of childhood." After the short plagiarism of Dickens, we are told of the mother's suicide and maternal grandmother's death, and then taken directly into a Tarot reading. Clearly the accounting of Peter's lineage which opens the text is meant to be read as important information, and

¹⁹⁸ The other two are "The Beginnings of Romance" and "The End." Of course, calling the first section of *Great Expectations* "Plagiarism," both makes Acker more of a plagiarist while also less of one by raising the question of whether it is really plagiarism if one admits it before hand.

the fact that Peter's name and the fate of his maternal ancestors are all we need to know by way of introduction suggests that these "bits about the mother" will have an increased significance, creating a character with less of a past, and therefore one whose history is freighted with significance (this is true of Dickens's novel as well). The fantasy of orphanhood in Freud's description of *familienroman* suggests that children turn the surprise of sexual knowledge into imaginings of illegitimacy, thereby providing room for fantasies of a more exciting, "true" lineage.¹⁹⁹ This is certainly an apt description of many of the orphaned characters in Acker's texts. Simultaneously, however, the bluntness of Acker's claim to the mother's importance--locating her at the outset of Great Expectations--serves paradoxically to make this mother less important; are we meant to read in the mother's suicide the same irony as in the preceding sentence: "I gave Pirrip as my father's family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister--Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith" (Great 5)? Does Acker's authority likewise rest on a tombstone? If so, whose--her mother's or the father's?

Barbara Johnson suggests that, "simultaneously a revelation and a coverup, autobiography would appear to constitute itself as in some way a repression of autobiography" (4). In trying to place the question of the mother's importance, and specifically how the mother's suicide both frustrates and creates the titular "great expectations," I find myself stuck between using the language of "autobiography" or "confession" or "plagiarism." I attribute some of this to my own well-developed sense of privacy, but one can further see in Peter's declaration, and in Acker's declaration, some more open strategy for confronting what is clearly a painful memory while also providing a coverup for it.²⁰⁰ This strategy is much more experimental, much more abject, much

¹⁹⁹ See Chapter Three, ". . . *Mater sed certissima* and 'In the Matter of Baby "M."'"

²⁰⁰ This may be the hinge--would not a mother's suicide always be painful, traumatic, no matter what claims to the contrary?

more disgusting, than the majority of the elements which critics and reviewers harp on-- the genitals, the sex, the waste. Rather than focus on such excesses, Acker provides in the opening to Great Expectations a vocalization of the absence of the mother, out of which the novel explores what this spoken absence may mean for the daughter, and especially for a daughter of age in a feminist world which depends, in some cruel way, on “sorting out” the relationship with the mother. But this “vocalization” is the problem; if I term it “confession” do I not consign the question of the women writer to an illegitimate genre? If I call it “plagiarism” do I not suggest that the woman writer is forced to steal, in Acker’s case, from male authors? And is “autobiography,” as Johnson said above and Jeanette Winterson will say below, not simply associated with a weaker form of feminine writing, set off against male authors’ more serious texts? Or, in the specific cases of describing Acker’s vocalization, does suicide always provoke confession in the survivors? Does one “admit” suicide? “Confess” it? “Narrate” it? Do all traumatic events prompt similar issues with the verbs of speech?

Jeanette Winterson, author and Acker’s friend, in her introduction to Essential Acker specifically connects Acker’s “struggle for feminine authorship” with the complaint that women’s personal texts are unproblematically assigned to the genre of autobiography:

when women include themselves as a character in their own work, the work is read as autobiography. When men do it--say Milan Kundera or Paul Auster--it is read as metafiction. *Women can only write from their own experience. Men are imaginative. Women write testimony and confessional. Men write the big picture . . .* --or so we’re told. (vii-viii, italics and ellipsis in original)

Women write autobiography, men write metafiction, and it is clear that metafiction is the

more properly “literary” pursuit. While this distinction, on the one hand, merely serves further to give men the intellect and resign women to the body, from the perspective of Kathy Acker we can also see that this distinction highlights the reason why men may fight so hard to hold on to the intellect in the first place. By calling Acker’s work autobiography and Auster’s metafiction, one can preserve, for Auster, the sanctity of the private moment. Is this metafiction just “safe autobiography”--autobiography with less risks? Acker, whose work is more self-evidently violent, pornographic, and personal, is not offered this separation; readers have a difficult time taking her as a person distinct from her characters, since her texts work against this separation.

It is not necessarily the case that we need to fight to reconceive Acker as a metafictional, as opposed to autobiographical, author. After all, who wants to be just a metafictionist? Of Kundera, Auster, or others, Acker would likely ask what these intelligent metafictionists were doing trying rationally to describe an “unbearable society,” an “American culture [that] now is insane” (“William Burroughs’s” 2). Acker can be consigned to autobiography because readers do not know what to do with her, as in her obituarists’ contradictory phrase “showy queen of the underground.” Following Winterson, autobiography, a label applied to women’s writing that includes women’s selves, is ostensibly less rigid, less calculated, less intellectual than male writing. Acker disproves this idea by constructing her texts so that the autobiographical rigidity of “real life” is confused by means of the diffuseness of personality, by the equally rigorous application of “fake life.” Take a character like Peter in Great Expectations. If male critics read Peter as a stand-in for Acker, then they must acknowledge that the transformations which Peter’s voice undergoes--turning into Sarah, or Rosa, or some other “I”-- result in a far more disconcertingly coherent version of self than would be expected

in straight autobiography. This may be Acker's great theme: that voice is the center of art; traversing fact, narrative, statement, subject. If this is to be labeled autobiography, then it is a much more involved type of writing of the self, compared to the fashionable, two-dimensional, *roman à clef* style of metafiction.²⁰¹

We are still left with the question of how to account for both the character's and author's maternal relationship, a question only asked when one is faced with the absent mother, who both generates the child's recall of his/her childhood and is simultaneously generated by the formal act of this plagiaristic recall. The recitative nature of Peter's back story, complete with answers to about-to-be-asked questions, doubly includes and separates the reader. I am in particular struck by the parenthetical sides: "my grandmother (on my mother's side) died." We are told something important--and we cannot help but sympathize with such a miserable tale--but neither can we refrain from being distanced by the address of such a practiced tone. The novel's end reveals another address--the daughter's letter to the mother: "Dear mother, / End" (Great 127-8).²⁰² Between these two moments, and between the two parentheses, is Acker's version of the purloined letter. Like that letter, the ownership of lineage is more important than the content; keeping the secret matters more than what the secret is. The maternal loss which begins Acker's novel is at one and the same time revealed and obscured in the parenthetical aside, hidden in a sense in plain sight. Author and friend Leslie Dick is also "struck by the set-ups, the opening moves: Kathy introduces some version of herself as character . . . and then this is quickly abandoned, without a backward glance" (115).

²⁰¹ In light of Acker's reference to Rebel Without a Cause as a myth for contemporary youth's "post-cynical" search for "a place so they can live," she discusses in her interview with Lotringer how Jack Kerouac's work came "too much from intuition and [so she] wasn't interested in that kind of autobiographical work" ("Devoured" 4).

²⁰² The line "Dear mother," appears at the very bottom of page 127, and the word "End" is alone, centered horizontally and vertically on page 128. Acker claims that Great Expectations "has no beginning nor end, but there's a cumulative effect" ("Devoured" 15).

More in rigor than boredom, Dick suggests that Acker uses “device after device to undo cumulative narrative logic,” and also to undo the automatic, machinic manner in which “the reader takes almost anything you give to turn it into a story” (115, 116). Having childhood recalled, ventriloquized to me by Acker, I now look desperately in the parentheses for a middle, an end.

As I suggested earlier, the “plainness” of the importance of the mother’s suicide to Acker’s early novels is something she only comes to acknowledge later.²⁰³ In “Paragraphs,” a short piece she wrote for The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association’s Spring 1995 special issue on “Identities,”²⁰⁴ Acker offers the reader fifteen fragmented, separated paragraphs that, put together, form a sort of *non-sequitur*, autobiographical self-portrait of Acker, all the more tantalizing since she slyly hints at the connections between her public performance, fictional performance, and her “real” life, while simultaneously combining all of these into an otherwise different formulation of identity.²⁰⁵ I imagine Acker performing something between biographical and autobiographical writing, a performance that could be placed over and against obituary’s necro-biography; both share expressive, performative features, both work by accretion, both rely on the anecdote and the incident. Mixing the speculative, the declarative, the confessional, the historically retrospective, and the theoretical, Acker discusses among other things Catholicism (she has “no genetic relation”), The Nation (they use “queer” to mean “gay”), body building (a “language I could access, find”), Bataille’s Story of the Eye (“some book”), “the whole system of dualistic thinking” (it is “messed-up”), and a debate

²⁰³ “The more that I write my own novels, the more it seems to me that to write is to read” (“Reading the Lack” 66).

²⁰⁴ “Paragraphs” appears in the same issue in which she discussed Arendt in “Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age.”

²⁰⁵ For instance, Acker claims her mother “didn’t think she could legally name me Kathy, so she gave me this name she hated. I’ve never been called by my legal name. Only when very drunk do I mention that name” (“Paragraphs” 88). What could this hated name be? Is this a true story? Or some metaphor for deferred, private, abject identity?

between Kristeva and Irigaray (“I prefer Irigaray’s position on the maternal”).

Throughout, Acker avoids specific claims of knowledge--“I’ve only started doing this work so I don’t know” (“Paragraphs” 92)--and for this reason her piece on identity is truly a piece on “identities,” reflecting the ambivalent uncertainty which a changing conception of self, the unformed “I,” engenders: “there are tons of meanings and all of these meanings collide. Meaning shifts” (“Paragraphs” 92). This statement describes all of Acker’s work. However, despite Acker’s refusal to more directly limn her own boundaries and identity once and for all, we can yet see in “Paragraphs” those key landscapes of meaning which she is most interested in exploring.

One of these landscapes is of course “language,” and some specific ones Acker discusses are dreams, body building, identity, and sex. For instance, she asks of herself, “when I passed through intense sexual activity . . . what did ‘my’ language, which is not just my language, look like?” (“Paragraphs” 92). I want to begin here with a point about the way Acker refers to the two kinds of sexual language--“‘my’ language, which is not just my language”--in order to compare it to the way Acker imagines the place of her mother in her writing. In imagining what these two languages may “look like,” Acker relies on punctuation to mark visually for the reader the distinction between them.²⁰⁶ The scare quotes around “‘my’ language” suggest a claim to an identity not predicated upon a coherent I (or as Acker would have it, an ironic “I”). Language belongs to Acker as it belongs to everyone, but by focusing on various linguistic registers--personal, sexual, unspoken--Acker distinguishes a shared project from her own multiple projects; there are different languages which operate differently, and she learns through her texts to speak them variously. Likewise, elsewhere in “Paragraphs,” Acker uses quotation marks

²⁰⁶ Avital Ronell says of “apostrophe,” the term for citation in rhetoric, “that it is a way of calling to the other . . . that citation is linked to memory, to acts of bringing back, recalling. . . . When we cite and recite, when we quote the other, we are calling to the irreplaceable one for whom there is no substitute” (14).

linguistically to call into question the mask-like labels of identity: “Bohemia,” “the norm,” “meaning,” “this” and “that,” “self,” “mine,” “otherness,” and finally “my” language.

Acker is clearly being ironic with these usages, either pointing out the constructedness of something like “the norm” or distinguishing between an assumed affinity between words and things and an intentional catachresis, as in the case of “Bohemia.”

In the above list I omitted one other instance of Acker’s use of ironic quotation-- “my mother.” She discusses her previous novel My Mother: Demonology (1993) and how the narrator Laure was originally conceived as a cross between Acker’s mother Clare and Colette Peignot, whom Bataille loved and who wrote under the pseudonym Laure. This mixing was “part of the reason for the rubric ‘my mother’” in the section of that book “Letters from My Mother to My Father” (“Paragraphs” 90). The quotations around “my mother” in “Paragraphs” establish the falsity of the autobiographical material; in fact, Acker goes on to claim that in writing My Mother: Demonology she became uninterested in her mother, and thus had mistitled “Letters from My Mother to My Father.” What is significant is that this claim comes on the heels of Acker’s most candid description of the relationship between her texts and her mother. In making this point, Acker relies on another typographical marker, not quotation marks but italics. In the tenth paragraph of “Paragraphs,” she writes:

I’m probably concerned with *my* mother in my texts. I’m concerned with *the* father and *my* mother. The majority of the autobiographical material in my books concerns my mother. I don’t actually write all that autobiographically, but now and then, there’s some direct autobiography. However, the section “Letters from My Mother to My Father” in My Mother: Demonology is not autobiographical. (“Paragraphs” 90)

Acker's italicization of "*my* mother" is striking in comparison to her other quotational distinctions. "'My' language," easily ironized by quotation marks, is very unlike "*my* mother," which for Acker has no ironic distinction. Or, more simply, for Acker language is unlike the mother, in that the former word represents a class of things that can be gotten outside of, or around, or entered into by the selfsame tricks of language, while the latter is a class of things either possessed wholesale or forever abandoned: there is "this" language or "that" language, but for Acker there is only *my* mother. Furthermore, in Acker's expression, the mother is formulated as an object in a relationship.²⁰⁷ We have seen Acker continually ironize the personal pronoun, as in "whenever I use 'I,' I am and I am not that 'I'" ("A Conversation" 12) or "any other aspect of whatever's called 'me'" ("Critical Languages" 83). This irony is in keeping with her questioning of the role of language on identity, which she linguistically ruptures and changes willfully. With the maternal, however, Acker's italicized possessive adjective does not have the same distance. Put into adjectival relationship with her mother, by stressing the possessive *my* mother, Clare Lehman becomes in Acker's texts a constitutive part of Acker.

"I'm probably concerned with *my* mother in my texts. I'm concerned with *the* father and *my* mother" ("Paragraphs" 90). Second, rather than ironize two or more kinds of mother, as she does with self-identity and language, Acker's "concerned" repetition tries to explain her novelistic relationship with her mother by comparing it to a relationship with fathers. We get, with an italicized article and possessive, not only two kinds of parents--mother and father--but also two kinds of mother and two kinds of father--*my* mother/*the* mother, *my* father/*the* father. While there is no "*my* father," no "*the* mother," these categories are implicitly suggested in Acker's formulation. This opens up much biographical space, and we are reminded again of the *künstlerroman*

²⁰⁷ In somewhat of the Irigarayan sense mentioned above.

aspects of her obituaries--abandoned by the father, molested by the stepfather, possessed by the grandmother, and refused by the mother. Yet Acker means not to distinguish between an 80s American “*the* mother” and her own real mother; she is not making a sociological claim about mothers or suggesting that *her* mother was even very much different from a supposed, archetypal *the* mother. As such, her *my/the* distinction seems less useful; most novelists and readers understand the difference between definite and indefinite objects, and that the latter can (intentionally or not) be signified metaphorically by the former. However, what is significant is what comes across in Acker’s discovery of her earlier interests: that, in hindsight, the play between *my* mother and *the* mother seems not to have mattered or existed for Acker *at the time*, as it must have for the reader.

The rest of her tenth paragraph, about the question of autobiography, gets picked up, as we saw, by her critics and obituarists: “the majority of the autobiographical material in my books concerns my mother. I don’t actually write all that autobiographically, but now and then, there’s some direct autobiography” (“Paragraphs” 90). The nonchalant manner of “I’m *probably* concerned more with” and “I don’t *actually* write *all that* autobiographically” (emphasis added) works against the emotional content of Acker’s textual use of her mother’s suicide. Acker here repositions the readers’ autobiographical question: her use of “true” autobiography is less an intentional, conscious, artistic act and instead something “probably” done; it is less either/or or “true”/“false” autobiography and instead a question of degree, of “all that” much-ness. Instead of writing autobiography, Acker suggests that she writes in the fashion of autobiography--autobiographically--and without the constraint of consistency or realism that the autobiographer faces. As with her abandonment of novelistic narrative strategies, Acker does not feel compelled to stick to one genre, instead continually shifting

“language” and “identity” around *her* mother. Barbara Johnson, in “My Monster / My Self,” suggests that “the autobiographical reflex is triggered by the resistance and ambivalence involved in the very writing of the book” (3), and this applies equally to Acker’s work. Johnson terms the resistance and ambivalence that triggers autobiography a “struggle for feminine authorship” (3). By placing feminine autobiography in juxtaposition to the mother, it appears that the traumatized orphan role, which Acker only later recognizes as a concern specific to her, is self-starting, it comes about by means of itself, provoked into expression by the ambivalence of trauma. In a similar vein, Roland Barthes, in Camera Lucida (1980), discusses the important Winter Garden Photograph of his mother which contained “something like an essence of the Photograph” (73). Barthes reads in this photograph, which he is unable to bring himself to reproduce in his text, the realization of what he experienced during his mother’s death, which occurred just before he found the photograph. Looking at the photograph, he found that “ultimately I experienced her . . . as my feminine child”; “she had become my little girl, uniting for me with that essential child she was in her first photograph” (Camera 72). He understood that this experience was his “way of resolving Death” (Camera 72); with his mother as feminine child, Barthes imagines, “I who had not procreated, I had, in her very illness, engendered my mother” (Camera 72). Barthes, who calls himself in his “autobiography” Roland Barthes the “being *pour rien*” (19), is like Acker confronted after the mother’s death with having to wait for a “total, undialectical death” (Camera 72). And Barthes, like Acker, suggests that writing may be the only way to “universalize the particularity” of being, of escaping the totality of a death as the end of one’s life.²⁰⁸

So goes one understanding of Acker’s public prurience. Another possibility is to

²⁰⁸ Acker was, like Barthes, childless, although Jeanette Winterson tellingly suggests that “Acker may be the true mother of Brat Pack writers like Bret Easton Ellis, but there is no disgust in her work” (ix).

take seriously Acker's claim that her books can be read at random; "even in Empire of the Senseless, which is the most narrative book, you could read pretty much anywhere" ("Devoured" 15). Writing a year after her death, Peter Wollen puts it like this: "parents were the generative source of Kathy Acker's private mythology, constantly bubbling up into the public domain--the parents who died, abandoning her, leaving her an orphan" ("Don't Be Afraid" ¶3).²⁰⁹ The "public domain" of Acker's life, including both her published fictions and the published details of her life (the interviews on motorcycles, tattoos, her shaved head), is percolated by another strong part of Acker we can label "myth." Wollen seems to see Acker's parents as both relevant and irrelevant, part of a personal mythmaking process that soon overwhelms her presence in the public domain. "The parents who died, abandoning her, leaving her an orphan"--we know all this stuff, as if it, like other myths, is old hat, neutered of real significance. Reading Acker's texts cover to cover will not necessarily inform a reader of the story of the myth any more than skipping about awhile will. However, this is not to say that the reoccurrence of Acker's myths dispels their power. Asked by Ellen Friedman "what is the new direction you've taken with Empire [of the Senseless (1988)]," Acker answers "the search for a myth to live by" (Acker, "A Conversation" 12). Myths, like language, are things sought (this is a key point). They also, like language, compete. The quest for "a myth to live by" is confused not only by other myths but by the idea of *the* myth. Does Acker really not know what Wollen suggests? Can we see, in her earlier work, that she really doesn't know how her own life, her own fictions, and her texts intertwine; that each really comes out of Acker's own myth of "*my* mother"?

That, in hindsight, the autobiographical material in her novels "probably" concerns

²⁰⁹ Wollen's "Don't Be Afraid to Copy It Out" was later reworked for the Lust for Life collection; this sentence is one that was excised for the later essay.

her mother seems to surprise Acker, and that surprise should surprise the reader. Earlier in "Paragraphs," Acker explains that "usually I don't know what a text is going to mean when I use it" (88) and "I don't work entirely consciously" (89). This may help explain her use of other texts--Dickens, Cervantes, Fanon, Kristeva--but not necessarily her use of herself and her mother. Claiming not to know "what she was doing" earlier, in "Paragraphs" Acker is able to clarify some of her earlier texts' erstwhile hidden concerns. The autobiographical question such an observation raises for the reader--do Acker's texts in fact give us more "*my mothers*" and how so--is one that explicitly comes to the forefront of Acker's later work, (such as My Mother: Demonology), which means that it is now a question no longer interesting to her. Only after having worked through her probable maternal concern is Acker able to notice what she was doing. For Acker's work, this mother trouble has everything to do with not only her subject matter, but also all of the other critical questions asked of her: the plagiarism of "false" autobiography, the experimental tone and the intimate subject matter, the place of childish and regressive language, her use of radical narrative as a response to notions of historical progress, her distrust of theory, and her nihilism and political engagement. In drawing out Acker's mother trouble, I want to demonstrate how Acker's insouciance about the importance of her mother's suicide to her early texts is 1) something she can only see later, once she has "dealt" with it and 2) is the reason why her texts use plagiarism, childish diction and radical narrative. For instance, the mother's suicide in Great Expectations, triggering all the resistance and ambivalence in Acker's "struggle for feminine authorship," literally brings together the four questions we began with. By conceiving of her later comprehension of the truth of her work as about "*my mother*," Acker makes plain the role of not understanding, of the acceptance of a state of uncertainty, in the formation of

identity. To Acker's mind, uncertainty is not a defect; going into "not understanding" is the only place to go. But if it seems plain that Acker's texts are all about her mother, what made this difficult to see then, and what makes her, even in 1995, avoid some of this truth (not "all that autobiographically," "I'm probably concerned")?

In "Paragraphs," Acker explains the significance of this state of uncertainty or not understanding in more detail. After discussing her use of Julia Kristeva's About Chinese Women (1977) for My Mother: Demonology, Acker juxtaposes Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's "position on the maternal" (90). Acker says she "prefers" (for all texts have their uses) Irigaray. Here Acker is thinking about "the abstraction named 'otherness,' 'otherness' especially in relation to women" ("Paragraphs" 90). Simply conceiving "otherness" as a discrete category opposed to the self is clearly facile, and so Acker instead seeks otherness as a means of leaving behind the self, "to find a kind of freedom in the non-space between texts, in the silence and emptiness between juxtapositions" (Glück 48). In reference to Kristeva's work, for instance, Acker is disappointed in what she saw as Kristeva's failure to explore this kind of otherness; one needs to ironize "a so-called white woman into Asia, a so-called democratic woman into a so-called communist state" ("Paragraphs" 89). Rather, complicating "otherness" as an abstraction results in movements, transformations, journeys, not labels, determinations, categories; moving towards or from an abstraction like "otherness" allows the borders of the abstraction to become clearer. As this abstraction of "otherness" is especially interesting in relation to women (and her relationship to language and to the maternal), the important focus is on a female character's own understanding of her location in or out of a particular abstraction. Thus, in the texts Acker writes and in the texts she uses, a woman's "otherness" often involves a quest which is a question: "I think I was curious about women traveling into

strangeness” (“Paragraphs” 89). We see this curiosity constantly in Acker’s 80s novels; they continually start and restart with a character crossing from one strange moment or place into another. Acker’s valuation of this ex-centric motion is part of the reason why she prefers Irigaray to Kristeva. Acker is “disappointed” by Kristeva, since Kristeva was “unable to leave herself.”

Acker turns to Italian director Dario Argento as an example of a successful movement towards “otherness” by way of traveling into strangeness. Acker is struck by a scene in his horror film *Suspria* (1977) which yields a “fabulous image” iterative of the abstraction named “otherness”:

when the heroine walks upstairs, she thinking that there’s something that she has to find out and then she realizes, as if suddenly, that she doesn’t understand at all, that she’s in a semi-magic horror world in which she is not able to understand.

When she reaches the top of the stairs, the kitchen is the first room she sees. A room, but it’s as open as a hall. And sitting on a chair is a huge, fat woman with a cleaver. (“Paragraphs” 89-90)

Acker’s description of this scene focuses on the unresolved strangeness; the heroine (and the viewer) expects to find out “something” only to be surprised to discover that the notion of discovery is entirely given over to a more fundamental state of incomprehensibility. This is not a matter of discovery or nondiscovery; the character is in a “world in which she is *not able* to understand” (emphasis added). These kinds of leave-takings excite Acker and characterize her texts. When her characters are not being chained, trapped, or locked up, they are journeying, they are leaving themselves with the expectation of “finding something out.”²¹⁰ That these characters do not reach conclusions

²¹⁰ For example, in *Don Quixote* we have a quest for love, in *Great Expectations* we have the Dickensian quest for parentage, in *Empire of the Senseless* two characters quest for a way out of Oedipus.

is not a problem; “traveling into strangeness” is a way of understanding “otherness,” and entering that “semi-magic horror world” of incomprehensibility or nonunderstanding is the point.

This journey into strangeness becomes especially important in relation to women and even more so in relation to women’s mothers. To make this clear, we should return to Acker’s theoretical question: Kristeva or Irigaray? Asking this question is another way of asking about the distinction between *my* mother and *the* mother. Acker is not clear, but she seems to read Kristeva’s position on the maternal through Kristeva’s concept of the abject, that which is neither object nor subject, but that which is “radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). Kristeva draws this out of Freud’s notion of the uncanny, and the abject like the uncanny is based on the familiar, and thus it constitutes an edge of familiarity, the edge of a destroying reality. Acker seems to associate this familiarity with “*the* mother,” who stands in for the subject’s dissolution of identity which provokes abjection, horror. In *Suspiria*, at the top of the stairs is the fat woman with the meat cleaver, and suddenly abjection, or *unheimlich*, or some other form of boundary-establishing recognition sets in.²¹¹ On the other hand, “traveling into strangeness,” as Acker puts it, requires an open-ended question. The problem with Kristeva’s formulation, which Acker sees Irigaray as addressing, is that “being female in a patriarchal society [may cause] a double and ambiguous relation to our mothers” (“Paragraphs” 90). As Acker explains it, the maternal relation may be twofold: “on the one hand, my mother was or is my lover. On the other hand, my mother was a victim in the male-defined society” (“Paragraphs” 90). A daughter can either identify with the mother as lover or as victim, and thus the daughter

²¹¹ In light of Johnson’s comment on the repressed possibility for feminine *unheimlich* at home (10), it is interesting to note that *Suspiria*, like many of Argento’s film, focuses on an American woman abroad.

defines herself as either lover or victim. Irigaray's solution is that "females, have to reinstate the mother as another person" ("Paragraphs" 90). Easier said than done; how to separate lover from victim, the trope from the particular, the individual from the idea, "my mother" from "the mother"? "The mother" does not seem to offer us much use value; culturally mediated, obscure, freighted with expectation, "the mother" is precisely the useless secret to discover. On the other hand, "my mother" seems especially invested in the problem of maternal identification and autobiography; in which texts does Acker see or not see *her* mother as victim or lover?

Part of this sorting out of the maternal relationship with the absent maternal in Great Expectations has to do with what Acker calls "movings," which is one of her terms for handling the abstraction of "otherness." Acker puts the question of movings as a philosophical problem related to narrative language, asking "how can I differentiate?" (Great 58). To get to this, I want to compare the beginnings of the first two sections of Great Expectations to demonstrate both Acker's formulation of the mother in that novel as well as her structural use of different philosophical modes to explain the child's relationship with the mother. In both cases (and in the novel's conclusion), Acker utilizes the concept of "movings" to model a paradoxically tragic and successful strategy for locating the question of her mother's suicide. We have looked at the first section of Great Expectations, "Plagiarism," so let us turn now to the middle, second section, "The Beginnings of Romance." The character Sarah who narrates this section starts as Peter did in "Plagiarism" with a family history. Sarah's mother became pregnant during World War II and was abandoned by her father, leaving mother, daughter, and grandmother to turn to each other. Here Acker, as she did in the first section, mixes narrative paragraphs about Sarah's relationship to her mother with more philosophical, theoretical paragraphs which

describe (or parody?) how “movings” logically operate to explain an individual’s consciousness in the world. Sarah first explains what happens after her father left:

Mother didn’t want me to leave her. . . . She craved my love . . . only so she could do what she wanted and evade the responsibility. . . . I lived so totally in the world bounded by her being her seemings, I had no idea we were a socially important family. I didn’t know there was a world outside her. (Great 58)

The idea of an all-consuming relationship with a mother is repeated throughout Great Expectations; for each narrator, it is true that “the whole world and consciousness revolve around my mother” (14). In each case, Acker reads or theorizes this relationship by different modes. Here, in “The Beginnings of Romance,” she uses philosophy. In a complex, searching passage which follows Sarah’s description of her absorption by her mother, Acker writes:

There is just moving and there are different ways of moving. Or: there is moving all over at the same time and there is moving linearly. If everything is moving-all-over-the-place-no-time, anything is everything. If this is so, how can I differentiate? How can there be stories? Consciousness just is: no time. But any emotion presupposes differentiation. Differentiation presumes time, at least BEFORE and NOW. A narrative is an emotional moving. (Great 58)

This type of moving becomes momentarily frightening to Sarah; if the loss of absolutes results in a supposedly liberating “moving-all-over-the-place-no-time,” then how is a character, already lost or already journeying, meant to find her way? How can there be such a thing as narrative--a linear moving that (for Acker) also moves all over at the same time? While this moving is presented as a serious question, Acker also mocks the agglutinative philosophical logic at work, getting out of one tautology by means of

another.²¹² Emotion presupposes, and hence generates, the possibility of differentiation, which in turn presumes, hence generates, time. Therefore, rewriting Descartes, “Something exists when it’s part of a narrative. Self-reflective consciousness is narrational” (Great 58); I think I think, therefore I narrate, therefore I am. Acker explains the trap elsewhere: “I feel I feel I feel I have no language, any emotion for me is a prison” (Great 24). The imprisonment of language (of lacking a useful language) is for Acker intimately related to emotion, which, since it requires a differentiation, and thus a past and present, itself becomes yet another kind of inaccessible narrative language.

Trying to make Acker’s characters’ logic work may be a futile exercise, but at its core is a concern with time. The question may be “how can a linear narrative move all over *in time* at the same time resulting in no time”; this is set up by the first sentence of “The Beginnings of Romance,” later repeated: “Timelessness versus time” (Great 57, 77). Seeking some strategy for differentiating in order to reclaim narrative and emotion first requires a workable conception of time, and especially of change through time. Acker arrives at this idea through a determination of the present by means of the past (more on this momentarily, but note that above Acker marks time by “BEFORE and NOW,” as opposed to a “BEFORE and AFTER”). In short, what is posed as a problem of logic of the present (how can I *now* have narrative, have emotion, how can I *now* differentiate) is predicated on a concrete establishment of a historical, “timely” problem. The turning point is Acker’s word “differentiate,” which means both to distinguish between external objects and events, as well as to differentiate between past and present selves, and even between present identities. How can one differentiate between love and abuse, and also how can one differentiate between me and me (I and I, me and mine, my and “my”)?

²¹² Sarah Schulman identifies in such passages “the systematic Judaic way that she builds her argument,” “the precision, explicitness, and clarity of feeling and idea” (¶9). Harryman says of this “that her practice is additive, not subtractive. She doesn’t leave anything behind” (38).

Structurally, here is the primary thrust of Acker's novels: one or more character's "movings" as they attempt this bifurcated question of differentiating amongst others as well as amongst their own selves. Acker's characters continually enter new and strange environments, and as the cycle repeats the reader sees more and more the innocence and impending perversion of Acker's characters. Often overlooked is the moment between these scenes, the transitions wherein this critical "moving" and differentiating is decided. As a problem of choice--how do we get to these places--most critics remark that Acker follows Burroughs's cut-up example. However, these between-moments, generally elided, can also be traced back to the earlier problem of "how can I differentiate." Shortly after the philosophical passage on differentiation of time, Sarah self-reflexively asks "Why is anybody interested in anything? I'm interested when I'm discovering. To me, real moving is discovering. Real moving, then, is that which endures. How can that be?" (Great 59). In the absence of a specific, universal answer to this question, characters revert to their already formed obsessions, and since, as we have seen, the major obsession for Acker is the mother's suicide, it is this act which most clearly represents the difficulty of Acker's question. Acker's "movings," related to the philosophical problem of "how to differentiate," in turn come from the immediate, traumatic problem of representing and thinking the mother's suicide.

As in the above passages from "The Beginnings of Romance," Acker develops this idea in the first section of Great Expectations, "Plagiarism." After the Dickens parody and Peter's brief appellative and matrilineal introduction, Peter is given a Tarot reading by a friend Terence, which provides a "psychic map of the present" (Great 5). Actually, for Peter the reading is "not so much a fortune--whatever that means--but a fairly, it seems to me, precise psychic map of the present, therefore: the future" (Great 5). This state of

affairs finds Peter orphaned, remembering his mother, tracing the connection between the manner of her death and the manner of Peter's life. How Peter considers his mother determines how Peter considers himself, and that is why fulfilling the titular great expectations is dependent upon moving beyond the current "image obsession" (6) that Peter has been given by Terence's "psychic map of the present," which is less predictive of the future than descriptive of the present. It is apparent that Peter needs to go somewhere, to do something, if only to reestablish the ability to change "the present, therefore: the future," and so the "moving" that motivates the novel finds Peter literally differentiating--into Sarah, Rosa, Cynthia, and other "I's. Put this way, Acker's Great Expectations, like the Dickens novel, is concerned with possible futures and with past motivations, with lineage, and with all the stabilizing and destabilizing functions of a character with a mysterious, unrecoverable childhood. As in Dickens's text, the reader expects our protagonist to resolve and overcome his/her traumatic "BEFORE" in order to successfully enter an adult "NOW." Simultaneously, however, we are forced to confront our protagonist's adult "NOW" as marked inexorably by an unchangeable "BEFORE"--is it possible for Peter to undo his "psychic map of the present, therefore: the future," which is marked so much by his mother's suicide?

For Peter and Acker, this psychic map takes the form of an "image obsession," which is the primary stumbling block for "movings," for narrative and emotional differentiation. Throughout Great Expectations, this image obsession is connected to the mother's suicide. The Tarot reading suggests to Peter that

the image obsession I'm scum. This powerful image depends on . . . the image I have of my mother. Before I was born, my mother hated me because my father left her (because she got pregnant?) and because my mother wanted to remain her

mother's child rather than be my mother. My image of my mother is the source of my creativity. I prefer the word consciousness. My image of my hateful mother is blocking consciousness. To obtain a different picture of my mother, I have to forgive my mother for rejecting me and committing suicide. (Great 6)

Again we see the complex, interrelated formulation of daughterly identity that Acker develops. She is paradoxically logical; she must forgive her mother to "obtain a different picture" so that this new image will replace the hateful image blocking the child's consciousness. The mother's creative source, which the daughter imagines, is oddly based on the mother acting like a daughter--wanting "to remain her mother's child." I connect this to the "ventriloquy of childhood" discussed above; Peter and Sarah and Acker are controlled by the image of the mother as child, and they replicate this confusing situation, child acting as mother acting as mother's child.

This confusing "image obsession" or "psychic map of the present" has as its goal forgiveness, but a forgiveness necessarily unasked-for and unreceived. Acker relates the impossible task of finding forgiveness towards the dead mother with "movings" and her characters' search for the abstraction of "otherness." Peter informs us at the outset of what he is trying to escape:

The day after my mother committed suicide I started to experience a frame.

Within this frame time was totally circular because I was being returned to my childhood traumas totally terrifying because now those traumas are totally real: there is no buffer of memory. There is no time; there is. (Great 6-7)

As in the later passage with Sarah, "timelessness versus time" is the issue. The mother's suicide, which imposes a frame of circular time on the child, relates to the circle Peter/Sarah/Acker's mother experienced of trying "to remain her mother's child rather

than be my mother.” Within the circular frame of the mother’s suicide, “movings” stopped, as does the daughter’s liberatory “traveling into strangeness” which would have taken her into the “semi-magic horror world” of a nondualistic identity (“Paragraphs” 89). Acker connects this circular frame with linear narrative, and Great Expectations’s journey of forgiveness must move in a manner neither linear nor circular.

By novel’s end, when Acker returns us to the mother’s suicide which began the text, she gives us a much shorter and more direct version of events:

My mother committed suicide and I ran away. My mother committed suicide in a hotel room because she was lonely and there was no else in the world but her, wants go so deep there is no way of getting them out of the body, no surgery other than death, the body will hurt. There are times when there is no food and those times must be sat through. I ran away from pain. (Great 127)

However, to say that Peter discovered something by the end of Great Expectations would compromise Acker’s interest in “movings.” We find instead a figure stuck at a basic truth, and a basic impulse to this truth. Despite the text’s journeys, despite the significance or lack of significance uncovered, the reader finds only just so much running from pain--not to any particular place, but just “away.” Like descriptions of the mother’s suicide and funeral, this fearful running away is also structurally repeated; early in the novel, the narrator thinks about the future and moving back to New York: “I’m scared out of my wits. I’m a scaredy-cat. I run away from everything” (Great 19).

Later, midway through the text, the narrator interrupts the narration, saying of the author, “I’m going to tell you something. The author of the work you are now reading is a scared little shit. She’s frightened . . . scared out of her wits . . . she runs away from anyone” (Great 70-1). This automatic kind of fright and flight, repeated throughout, explains the

impetus to “movings,” but how are we to distinguish between a fearful “running away” and “movings” which bring us closer to the useful abstraction of otherness? At the end of Great Expectations, when Acker considers the flight prompted by her mother’s suicide, she has her narrator consider the efficacy of the novel’s journey; has this been a successful moving, or have Acker’s narrators just been running away, towards suicide like the mother? The novel’s final lines suggest a negative answer to this question; we cannot decide which works, but can only say which does not: “I don’t know if the world is better or worse than it has been I know the only anguish comes from running away. Dear mother, End” (Great 127-8). Acker’s final address to the mother is difficult to read; is this her way of turning back to face the absent mother, to bring an end (not “the end”) to the only anguish she knows?

Part of the difficulty is that endings for Acker are too often traumatic and flight-provoking. Here is Sarah, in “The Beginnings of Romance”: “I realize that all my life is is [sic] endings. Not endings, those are just events; but holes” (Great 64). Are we meant to read “my life is *in* endings,” as in “all my life is in holes”? Acker’s characters are generally resilient--enslaved, raped, traumatized, aborted, wounded: they continue existing, moving on to the next tragedy. The endings which occupy Sarah, which occupy Peter, which occupy Acker, are dismissed here as “just events,” although Sarah’s precision means more than just the past is past. Marking time, “just events,” accumulate; however, the holes build up so long as life does. Alternatively, we can read the stuttering “is is” as proleptic-- looking forward to the holes. Life is not *in* the holes, but *is* the holes. Perhaps, then, we can read the stuttering “is is” as a description of dependency, yet another collaboration between the past and the identical present to define the future. Unsurprisingly, to explain “life is is endings,” Sarah offers a maternal example: “For

instance when my mother died, the ‘I’ I had always known dropped out. All my history went away. Pretty clothes and gayness amaze me” (Great 64). The history that drops away and the lost matrilineal connection shifts Sarah into a different conception of “I.” Acker suggests that the history of the woman writer is founded upon her relation to her mother. Lost after the mother’s death, Sarah is amazed by pretty clothes; absent is the wonder of the mother, and without this wonder Sarah literally loses focus, doubling into an “‘I’ I” who “is is” “endings/holes.”

But this trauma, the painful hole at the center of the daughter’s self after the mother’s suicide, is also recuperable in Great Expectations. At the beginning of “Plagiarism,” Peter describes the Tarot reading which happened “ten days ago (it is now almost Christmas 1979),” and we there learn that the mother committed suicide Christmas Eve 1978 (Great 5). Shortly after, there is a scene which we can read as either a flashback or a dream. “Today is Christmas” (Great 10), and playing with her mother in the virgin snow under the 59th Street Bridge, the narrator wants to remain “in this magic snow with the beautiful yellow sun beating down on me as long as I can until a voice in my head (me) or my mother says, ‘Now you know what this experience is, you have to leave’” (Great 10). If a flashback, this maternal advice has missed its mark; the virgin snow, the beating sun, the child’s play will all ruin the experience if they do not leave. The narrator’s Christmastime tableau is a moment of being, and so this memory may also be a dream. “(Me) or my mother,” which may be the same thing, knows that being has to give way to becoming, that the moment gives way to time, which by history or memory wants to return us, circularly back to the moment. This is what dreams do in Acker’s novel, what the “ventriloquy of childhood” does, what the “running away” from trauma does: it tries to return a character back to “what the experience is,” while the character must work to

leave, to move outside of the linear or circular conceptions of time (of history, memory, and narrative) that are set up to manage anguish.

And how does this all allow us to say “engaged withdrawal” and “Kathy Acker”? Was Acker neither a nihilist nor an orphan, but yet in both cases still an artist constructing herself as artist, trying to achieve what Sartre calls “the most complete consciousness of being embarked”? Is not Acker’s “ventriloquy of childhood” another version of Pygmalion, portraying another artist who yearns but still does not know what to expect from this yearning, an artist who fell in love with something like a statue? Is not the letter of address which ends Great Expectations, like Poe’s purloined letter, a concealment of a truth attendant upon the expression of a truth, or in the case of Acker, and an expression and suppression of the mother’s end? Barbara Johnson argues that, “simultaneously a revelation and a coverup, autobiography would appear to constitute itself as in some way a repression of autobiography” (4). Finally, in the case of the woman writer, and of women’s history, and of Kathy Acker, we can also ask as Johnson does, “is autobiography somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves” (4)?

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