

# intervalla: Volume 4, 2016

## Modernist Currents

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This issue of *intervalla* takes as its topic modernism (broadly conceived as the period of 1890-1950), as it aims to illuminate and reflect on the current state of modernist studies. The seven diverse essays collected here represent a variety of new approaches to modernism across multiple genres (poetry, fiction, fantasy, journalism) as well as both across and beyond the artistic disciplines. They study topics such as the intersection of art and science and the role of the marketplace, and they engage with our modernist past from a variety of angles, ranging from examinations of material culture, to themes of genetics and aging, to considerations of class, race, and gender, to constructions of literary and book history. The essays consider a broad range of modernist writers, including, but not limited to, Djuana Barnes, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, Winifred Holtby, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Ezra Pound, Vita Sackville-West, and Virginia Woolf.

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# Introduction

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“Now the current flows, now we rush faster than before.”  
—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

This issue of *intervalla* is entitled “Modernist Currents.” Through seven diverse essays, the issue aims to both shed light and reflect upon the current state of modernist studies by offering a selection of emerging and important approaches to modernism. Many words have already been dedicated to the state of modernism as a field of study (indeed, this project of critical self-reflection is, in no small part, the subject matter of Copland and Peat’s essay here), but the intention of this issue of *intervalla* is not to solve or even engage with what Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers have called in their introduction to *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, the “problem” of modernism (1). What this issue intends is at once more modest and wider ranging: to showcase seven “currents,” each of which might offer a different route into modernism. As the epigraph from Virginia Woolf suggests, currents can flow at different speeds, and they can also flow in multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes even opposing directions. Thus these essays are purposely diverse in both approach and theme, even as each author engages with the common question of how his or her work resonates with broader contemporary trends in the study of modernism.

There is, of course, another obvious sense of “current”—that which is contemporary, which belongs to the present time. As this issue explores some of the questions that are currently preoccupying modernist scholars, it offers insight into what modernism means to us today and a snapshot, albeit necessarily partial, of the state of modernist criticism in 2016. Broad ranging in both topic and theoretical approach, the essays in this issue reflect emerging and evolving critical trends, including print culture, aging studies, race and ethnic studies, object-

oriented ontology, and young adult fiction; and, at the same time, they offer reconsiderations of more established tenets of modernist studies, including conceptions of mimesis, *bildung*, and modernist “difficulty.” The essays cross multiple genres (poetry, fiction, fantasy, journalism, and literary criticism) and they also follow the trans-disciplinary spirit of *intervalla* by transgressing disciplinary boundaries as they consider, for example, the intersection of art and science or the role of the modernist marketplace.

Yet, while the issue as a whole might be concerned with what is “current,” many of these essays reveal a persistent engagement with ideas of history and the past in the form of literary and book history, genetics or genealogy, inheritance, mourning, or even fantastical memories. As Glenn Clifton observes in his essay here, to be current need not entail the “rejection of the past wholesale” but rather the “ability to reconsider and transmit the past after critical consideration” (92). Each essay thus offers a reconsideration of a particular modernist text or tradition but, taken together, they also suggest a view of modernism as a movement made up of multiple overlapping and multi-directional currents and counter-currents. As a whole, then, this issue invites readers to reflect upon the currents (in both senses of the word) that come to constitute both the modernist canon and our own critical community of modernist scholars.

The first essay, Sarah Copland and Alexandra Peat’s “Mending Walls and Making Neighbors: Spatial Metaphors in the New Modernist Studies,” serves to both open and frame this issue of *intervalla*. Copland and I explore the project of definitional enquiry that is central to the New Modernist Studies and, in the process, identify the predominance of spatial metaphors and, particularly, metaphors of walls, borders, and boundaries in the discourse of modernist criticism. In order to think further about such representations and conceptions of walls, we turn to Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” a famously hard to pin down modernist poem which ambiguously depicts walls as not only borders, but also points of contact and exchange, and which, moreover, is perhaps most interested in the relationships between the people who build the walls and live both within and without them. The essay ends by turning attention to a related

metaphorical construct that is equally central to Frost's poem, that of the neighbor. It is tempting to apply the neighborhood model of modernism advanced in this essay to the collection of essays in this issue of *intervalla*, and to see the individual essays as well as the various modernist writers and thinkers addressed therein as metaphorical neighbors. For Copland and me, the neighborhood model is appealing in the way that it draws attention to "the territory we share" while at the same time allowing "multiple and perhaps seemingly incompatible approaches" (22).

The next two papers explore modernism's own complex relationship with the past in order to complicate simplistic discourses of progress. In "Plot Counter Plot: Genetics and Generic Strain in the Modernist Novel of Formation," Daniel Aureliano Newman is interested not in neighbors but in families, particularly in the tension between biological notions of hereditariness and literary conceptions of individualism. He explores how modern scientific theories of genetics disturbed received ideas about inheritance and, in turn, narrative constructs of individual development. Newman surveys modernist *bildungsromane* that overtly engage with questions of reproduction and heredity (including works by Samuel Becket, James Joyce, and Nella Larsen), coining the term *genic* in order to describe novels specifically interested in genetics. Noting that past modernist scholarship has tended to "emphasize if anything [biology's] sinister applications," Newman draws our attention instead to the "richness and critical power modernists might have recognized in the science" (31). In "The New Old Woman of the 1930s: Aging and Women's History in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby," Glenn Clifton explores similar questions of inheritance and intergenerational connection, but he places them in the context of gender politics, noting how women modernists of the 1930s imagined new models of inheritance at a time when "material inheritance" had long been "an emblem of patriarchy" (79). In a richly historical reading of novels by Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, and Winifred Holtby, Clifton convincingly counters the notion that modernism was predominantly concerned with the new and the young by showing how older female protagonists engage with their younger



counterparts, and become both representations of an alternative women's history and critical emblems for progress.

Following these essays are pieces by Jennifer Sorensen, Claire Battershill, and Alyson Brickey, which can be roughly grouped together as sharing an interest in modernist print culture and textual artifact. Sorensen's "Female Embodiment in the Marketing of Modernism" is, like Clifton's essay that precedes it, about the New Woman. Sorensen reads the hypervisible women's gendered bodies circulated and displayed in modernist print culture, paying close attention to photographs and pictorial representations of women modernist writers in highbrow little magazines, popular print venues, and book dust jackets and frontispieces. Sorensen notes how the gendered marketing of modernism capitalized on the "glamour" of the woman writer in a way that, for some writers, could feel like a misrepresentation, if not violation. As she reads between the texts and images of women writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Djuna Barnes, she considers authors' concerns about the blurring of private and public versions of their selves, and Sorensen's consideration of "readerly desires for authorial bodies" (118) might also make us question some of our current constructions of modernist women writers. In "Metaphor and the Limits of Print in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*," Claire Battershill refigures the famous "difficulty" of Pound's poem as textual as much as interpretive when she describes it as "an essentially unpublishable epic" (126). Battershill notes the fundamentally fragmentary nature of *The Cantos*, tracing the itinerant paper trail of an epic that was published in parts, in little magazines, newspapers, and various book editions. She explores Pound's own use of textual metaphors in the poem, suggesting not only how these offer "the reader ways of seeing the mutable textual form of the long poem" (127), but also how both these textual metaphors and Pound's attention to speech and modes of orality point to the "limits of print" (128). By the end of Battershill's essay, the "unpublishable," unreadable epic emerges as an exploration of the limits of both print culture and readerly attention. Alyson Brickey's "Faulkner's Coffin" is interested in both narrative form and the book as an object. She reads *As I Lay Dying* as "a kind of textual

carpentry” (144), specifically a perspectively 6-sided narrative construction that resembles the fictional coffin the Bundren family carry with them throughout the novel. As Brickey explores William Faulkner’s novel through the frame of Frederic Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism*, she claims the text as a “realist modernist object” that is simultaneously “built and destroyed” (147, 146). Like Sorensen and Battershill, Brickey is interested in readers and reading: her analysis of Faulkner’s novel shows how scholarship’s evolving interest in material objects can reshape our ideas about mimesis, realism, and ekphrasis as well as, more broadly, “art’s relationship to the external world” (163).

This issue of *intervalla* concludes with an essay by Jennifer Reimer entitled, “Darkening the Dream: The Fantasy of History and the Reality of Difference in Libba Bray’s *The Diviners*.” At first glance, this essay might seem to take us away from the field of modernism, as it explores a young adult fantasy novel published in 2012. However, Reimer examines the interwar Harlem setting of Bray’s novel, paying particular attention to depictions of race, ethnicity, and social class in order to suggest how the interwar era made and shaped the world that we have inherited. Reimer argues that “Bray uses the possibilities of historical fantasy not only to re-imagine US history from the borders, but also to comment back on the US’s present moment” (191). Bray’s imaginative re-engagement with modernist writers such as Langston Hughes allows Reimer to explore what modernism means to us now. Her essay can productively be placed in dialogue with the essay by Copland and Peat that opens the issue. However, whereas the latter focuses on modernist criticism and scholarship, Reimer opens up room to consider modernism’s continuing impact on popular culture as well as contemporary politics and models of ethics. This suggests, therefore, one more way in which the “currents” of modernism continue to flow and reverberate into the world in which we live today.

## **WORKS CITED**

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# **Mending Walls and Making Neighbors: Spatial Metaphors in the New Modernist Studies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay explores the project of definitional inquiry central to the New Modernist Studies, identifying the centrality of spatial discourse and particularly models and metaphors of walls therein. The essay turns to Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" in order to resituate the definitional project of the New Modernist Studies in modernism's own representations and conceptions of walls not only as borders and boundaries, but also as points of contact and exchange. Our reading recovers the ambiguous and complex plurisignification of walls in the poem and, perhaps more importantly, the relationships between the people who build walls and are divided and brought into contact by them. Ultimately, the essay uses Frost's depiction of two uneasy neighbors in order to advance a neighborhood model of modernism, one that participates in the existing spatial discourse of the New Modernist Studies but regards modernism as a shared territory that accommodates tentative groupings, difficult-to-fit figures, and even outright contestation.

## **KEYWORDS**

Modernism, The New Modernist Studies, Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," Spatial Metaphors, Walls, Neighbors, Literary History

In his 1986 essay, “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault announces the twentieth century as the “epoch of space” (22). This slight but richly evocative essay anticipates not only the emerging critical trends of literary and cultural studies but also the ways in which critics of twentieth-century literature increasingly understand their own field. The “spatial turn”—a term variously attributed to Edward Soja, Kevin Lynch, Frederic Jameson, and others—demonstrates new interest in how, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, “every society . . . produces a space, its own space” (31) and how geography determines ourselves and our worlds. Modernist studies, in particular, has found a new lease of life in examining the spaces of modernity: the spatial turn has led to productively interdisciplinary work with a keen awareness of the ways in which modernist literature engages with tropes of geography and mapping (Thacker; Heggland), travel and transcultural experience (Kaplan; Farley), cosmopolitanism (Walkowitz; Berman), and imperial and anti-imperial discourses (Kalliney; Esty; Booth and Rigby).

It seems no coincidence that the spatial turn precedes the emergence in 1998 of what became known as the New Modernist Studies. At the very least, the timing suggests that the New Modernist Studies was inevitably influenced by work being done with space and geography and points to cross-pollination between modernist and postcolonial studies. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz argue convincingly that an emphasis on transnational exchange has been “crucially transformative” (738) to the New Modernist Studies, and, in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012), Mark Wollaeger suggests that a global perspective changes our understanding of modernism itself, complicating not only “the issues of temporal delimitation” but also “the geographies of modernism . . . , modernism’s conceptual contours . . . , and its motivations” (7). Our essay takes as its impetus the observation that the spatial turn permeates modernist theory and criticism, even that which is not overtly geographical in either nature or interest. Much writing about modernism persistently employs spatial metaphors in

order to describe and understand the “conceptual contours” of our field. Geographers like Neil Smith warn that a retreat to the realm of metaphor risks erasing literal, material spaces (98-9). Without dismissing the importance of this warning for our critical practices, we aim to account for the pervasive spread of spatial metaphors in the New Modernist Studies, as it has developed in the last twenty years, and to reflect on how these metaphors are shaping our understanding of our field and the spaces of our own critical work.

## THE SPACES OF MODERNISM AND THE NEW MODERNIST STUDIES

The emergence of the New Modernist Studies both marked a new kind of modernist criticism--one more interested in an expanded canon including a greater ethnic, cultural, and gendered diversity of voices, and geographically, socially, and temporally disparate texts--and inaugurated a period of intense self-reflection for the field. This self-reflection continues to focus on the interrelated questions of how to delimit modernism and how to both make and tend a space for modernist studies. Often, the versions of modernism and modernist studies that emerge are not only different but in fact contradictory, an outcome that Susan Stanford Friedman finds generative for further inquiry when she notes that “*modern*, *modernism*, and *modernity* form a fertile terrain for interrogation, providing ever more sites for examination with each new meaning spawned” (“Definitional Excursions” 497). For Friedman, modernist critics are implicitly figured in spatial terms as farmers working a “terrain” or archaeologists finding “sites.” In order to do such critical work, the New Modernist Studies has worked hard to create literal spaces for modernist scholarship such as the rooms and halls of Modernist Studies Association and British Association of Modernist Studies conferences as well as the collective textual spaces of the journals *Modernism/modernity* and *Modernist Cultures*, book series, edited collections, and textbooks or companions to the field.<sup>1</sup>

The spaces of modernism and, indeed, the borders of the field have always been up for debate, for modernism itself was characterized by an ethos of inquiry, uncertainty, and contradiction. As Michael Coyle notes, “Modernism has always been more than a neutral descriptor, and has invariably provoked contest” (17). According to Friedman, the “terminological quagmire” that modernist studies finds itself in may result from “a repetition of the unresolved contradictions present and largely repressed in modernity itself” (“Definitional Excursions” 499). One way in which the New Modernist Studies attempts to understand these “unresolved contradictions” is by returning to the archives to pay attention to how modernist voices speak about their own modernism. Examples of such undertakings include the Modernist Archives Publishing Project (MAPP), the Modernist Journals Project (MJP), and Editing Modernism in Canada (EMiC). Such projects neither aim at nor result in a settled view or single story of modernism; instead, they illuminate the extent to which modernists themselves were anxious about what made them *modernist* or even modern. Such anxiety could be productive, but could also, as Coyle notes with reference to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, result in gatekeeping the canon. The many parallels to the New Modernist Studies’ current period of critical debate are clear. Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat’s *Modernism: Keywords* tracks cultural and literary debates by showing the often complex and contradictory ways that various keywords circulated in modernism. The entry for “Modern, Modernism” exemplifies the contested nature of these terms, noting that as early as 1934, Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney were asking, “What is this Modernism?” Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, and Peat conclude that “returning to modernism as used by ‘modernists’ . . . releases the term from narrow use: in the modernist period, modernism represents something distinctive yet heterogeneous about this particular age, and, at the same time, something ubiquitous and permanent in human life” (145). How does it help us if we understand definitional debates as more than just a particular critical

trend in the New Modernist Studies but as an intrinsic element of modernism, too? How can we do critical work when we stand on such shifting ground? And what does this so-called release from narrowness mean for us as critics?

### **SPATIAL METAPHORS IN THE NEW MODERNIST STUDIES**

On the one hand, the New Modernist Studies offers a view of modernism as open, mobile, unfixed, plural, and constantly in debate, yet, on the other hand, at the heart of these conceptualizations of the field are spatial metaphors of containment, enclosure, boundaries, and division--walls that can be looked over, moved, knocked down or that can contain, protect, divide. The prevalence of wall imagery seems paradoxical in light of the fact that scholars (other than architecture scholars) do not seem to be particularly interested in modernist literary representations or conceptions of walls, even though many modernist texts, from Franz Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" to H. D.'s *Within the Walls*, do take up literal walls as central subjects. Modernist literature's engagement with walls and boundaries might have something to do with the ways in which geographical and social spaces were being policed, inscribed, and rewritten in the period through such means as trenches in the first world war, border control and passports, partition in India, and the erection of the Berlin Wall. Walls of this kind and the impetuses behind them, however, are by no means unique to the modernist period. Indeed, they have been around for millennia and remain central to our collective psyche, as the Melilla border fence, the Israeli West Bank Barrier, and the now threatened Great Wall of Calais indicate.

While representations of walls in modernist literature and their possible relationships to material walls in the period suggest a rich vein for scholarship, we are particularly interested in connecting these fictional modernist walls with the metaphorical significance that walls have accrued in the debates about what modernism was and what the New Modernist Studies is.



Throughout these debates, we find discourse that is not spatial in subject but is spatial conceptually. Wollaeger is “self-consciously unraveling the edges of the field,” while Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel “emplace” modernism so that the term “breaks open” (3). Friedman is perhaps most conscious of her spatial move, as, alluding to Doyle and Winkiel, she enjoins us to “[a]lways spatialize” (“Periodizing Modernism” 426) and reflects on the inherently spatial nature of the definitional project:

Definitional acts establish territories, map terrains, determine centers, margins, and areas ‘beyond the pale.’ Attempts to establish permeable borderlands instead of fixed boundaries and liminal spaces of considerable intermixing between differences diffuse to some extent the territorial imperative of definition but cannot ultimately eliminate the function of categories to demarcate some phenomena in opposition to others which do not belong. (“Definitional Excursions” 506)

Spatial metaphors are so pervasive that they are even being used to describe other spatial metaphors. Mark Wollaeger speaks of “expansion” along “axes” to describe how “Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz have summed up the transformation of modernist studies under the rubric of an ‘expansion’ taking place along three axes--temporal, spatial, and vertical” (9). Spatial metaphors have even made their ways into the self-conceptions of modernist scholarly associations. The Modernist Studies Association’s mandate is articulated in terms of disciplinary “silos” that need to be broken down and “walls” of departments and disciplines that need to be “look[ed] past.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Editing Modernism in Canada project was described by one of its members as “a centre without walls.” Spatial metaphors can be found in all the spaces of the New Modernist Studies.

Out of this rich abundance of spatial metaphors emerge certain trends or phases in the New Modernist Studies’ self-proclaimed agenda of self-reflection about the state of the field. An

initial period of pluralization transformed “modernism” to “modernisms,” and Michael Coyle declared the question of “whether Modernism is something singular, or something plural” (20) the most pressing matter for twenty-first century critics to resolve. The move to plural modernisms, however, also entailed critical wall building as canonical modernists were divided from progressive modernists and old modernism distinguished from new modernisms. Even as we questioned if modernism was singular or plural, this very debate over pluralization led to a predominant ideal of expansion and the concurrent aim to collapse walls in geographical, temporal, and vertical senses. Modernism became global. The historical limits of the modernist period were stretched and then broken. Modernism embraced popular and “low” culture along with or instead of the high and the canonical. While this project of expansion venerated getting rid of critical walls that had constricted modernism and limited our approach to it, there came, at the same time, a perhaps ironic resurgence of critical wall building. In response to modernism going global, for example, we can see an increased critical interest in specific localities, and, at the same time as temporal expansion, emerge projects like Kevin Jackson’s *Constellation of Genius: 1922: Modernism Year One* (2013).

After the New Modernist Studies has pluralized and pulled at the edges of modernism, expanded and exploded it, where are we now? This is the question posed by the upcoming 2017 MSA conference, which takes as its theme “Modernism ‘Today’” and asks, “What does Modernism mean to us today?” A survey of recent monographs dealing with literary modernism shows that inherited terms for defining modernism (e.g. “high modernism”) and traditional regional distinctions still remain, but they now exist alongside a wealth of new coinages creating categories by geographic region, time period, race/culture/ethnicity, language, genre, relation to other periods, gender/sexuality, and more. Modernism can now be green, black, Sapphic, middlebrow, late, Victorian, gothic, machinic, neo, or haptic.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, some of these terms are

descriptive and do not necessarily indicate a larger critical movement, but the proliferation of qualifiers or definitional markers for modernism shows how such an urge to categorize is shaping our scholarship. It also shapes our scholarly associations, as a brief survey of the 2015 Modernist Studies Association conference program includes panel and paper titles such as “Backward Modernism,” “Petromodernism,” and “Flyover Modernism.” Such titles also evince a growing self-referential playfulness that comes from a renewed confidence in the field; perhaps we have not reached a consensus about what modernism is, but there is, at the least, a consensus that the debate is central to our field. Recent years have also seen a proliferation of “introductions” to and overviews of modernism, including but not limited to Bloomsbury’s New Modernism series edited by Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, Pamela Caughie’s edited collection *Disciplining Modernism* (2010), and Mary Ann Gillies and Aurelea Mahood’s *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (2007). Taken together, these works suggest that we are currently in a time of consolidation as we look at how far we have come since the emergence of the New Modernist Studies and try to make sense of the field we have created. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, we might see these ongoing definitional debates in the context of the always coexistent centrifugal and centripetal forces at play in the shaping of a modernist discourse. The centrifugal forces push to multiply, decenter, and pluralize modernism, but, at the same time, a centripetal force urges stability and definition.

While we can use these coinages to trace a recent critical history of modernism, they are perhaps most interesting in how they provoke questions about why we are defining, dividing, and walling in modernism in these particular ways. As we continue to make and remake critical walls in order to create the optimum spaces in which to do our research, we also need to be aware of the work that these walls permit and prohibit. Susan Stanford Friedman notes how definitions often end up being “fluid” so as to serve “the changing needs of the moment”

(“Definitional Excursions” 497). She continues, “[t]hey reflect the standpoint of their makers. They emerge out of the spatio/temporal context of their production. They serve different needs and interests. They accomplish different kinds of cultural work” (“Definitional Excursions” 497). Even the avowed ideal of getting rid of limits and borders comes with an agenda. Mark Wollaeger describes a 2010 MLA session on “Unboxing Modernism,” which relied upon “an unstated ideal of unboxedness, a conception of modernism liberated from definitional corners and dead-ends” (11). He recalls how while some attendees alluded to E. M. Forster on the need to exclude something or else we have nothing, “others engaged in a bravado refusal of limits” (11). Wollaeger’s comments come in the context of a discussion around the formation of global modernism; they thus reveal that things are both gained and lost when we pluralize and expand. Moreover, as he frames his discussion of global modernism with an acknowledgment of the “historical reality of nations and their institutions” (4), he suggests the folly of pretending that walls do not exist. While Wollaeger speaks specifically about the global turn in modernism, his words, warnings, and the critical orientation he advocates have a broader significance for the New Modernist Studies as a whole: the “contingency of . . . clusters” in the “coherent yet diverse group of essays” that constitute the *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* can be “reshuffl[ed] and recross[ed],” thereby enacting a “mobile and continuously provisional” perspective that simultaneously acknowledges one’s own position and decenters it (6).

### **READING WALLS IN ROBERT FROST’S “MENDING WALL”**

If we were to turn to a modernist text and adopt this provisional and mobile positioning suggested by Wollaeger, we might find no better case study to work with than Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall.” A consideration of Frost’s poem also offers the possibility of moving the existing walls delimiting what work might be considered quintessentially modernist: Frost is an

unusual or, to extend the metaphor, off-the-wall choice as a modernist case study. Rarely featured in scholarship that surveys modernism, he is instead typically considered an American regionalist. He tends to be studied alone, paired with Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot or, less frequently, with Marianne Moore or Wallace Stevens. Frost is thus not typically regarded as the kind of poet whose work could stand in for modernist poetry as a whole and be brought into dialogue with modernist work in other genres. Yale's Modernism Lab entry, a reasonably definitive reflection of the field, notes that Frost had an "intimate if fraught relationship with international modernism." The issue of Frost's relationship with modernism was also raised in a more public forum through a 2010 *Slate* article, which notes that "[t]his question of categories is interesting not in itself but because Frost himself thought about it." Our choice of Frost is thus grounded not only in our interest in his poem's representation and conception of walls and in his status as a peripheral modernist but also in our broader argument that contemporary definitional debates about modernism are extensions or products of modernists' own debates about this issue. In attending to all three of these interrelated aspects of Frost's work, we take up Mark Wollaeger's injunction that scholars of modernism follow the spirit of Sanja Bahun's call for a "flexible conceptual template . . . that is *constantly redefined by the very object of its inquiry*" (4). Our project here is not to pull a particular, single meaning from "Mending Wall," but rather to use the poem as a possible way to understand better such a curious representation of walls and boundaries, thereby informing not only our ideas about the modernists themselves but also our construction of the field of modernist studies.

Frost's "Mending Wall" is conveyed by a speaker who reports and reflects on the annual springtime wall-mending activity he undertakes in rural New England with his neighbor, who seems to more fully embrace the existence or need for walls even though the speaker himself initiates the collaborative annual activity of mending wall. The poem presents two aphorisms, the

neighbor's motto, "good fences make good neighbors," and another repeated phrase attributed to the speaker, "something there is that doesn't love a wall." The wall they are mending is simultaneously a barrier that keeps the neighbors apart, a topic of conversation, a prompt for independent reflection, and an occasion for collaborative activity. These four undertakings are neither one-time events nor ongoing processes, but rather activities that must be continually returned to and re-enacted. When the speaker observes that they "*meet* to walk the line / And set the wall between [them] once again" (13-14, emphasis added), the poem portrays a momentary coming together with the wall as a point of meeting.

Scholarship on "Mending Wall" often takes a pick-a-side approach based on an endorsement of one of the poem's two repeated aphorisms about walls and a concomitant dismissal of or opposition to the other. Social sciences criticism has co-opted the poem in order to mobilize its insights about walls to do political work. Surveying the use of the poem in border studies, geographer Kenneth D. Madsen and literary scholar D. B. Ruderman lament that "political identification seems to require believing one set of propositions at the expense of another" (83) and observe that "[i]n many ways 'Mending Wall' is a Rorschach test in which proponents see and hear their own positions reflected in the narrative contours of the poem" (84). While we concur with Madsen and Ruderman's conclusion that "What is useful and generative in 'Mending Wall' is precisely its ambivalence about borders and boundaries," their reading nonetheless shares something with the very readings they aim to improve upon with their "integrated, contextual, and holistic" (83) approach: the premise that there are, in this poem, two distinct and oppositional sides on the issue of walls, their existence, and value that the reader "learns from . . . and/or is forced to careen back and forth between" (86). This position of identifying distinct sides at the same time as championing ambivalence is deeply problematic, and yet it dominates even approaches in literary criticism that do not seek to mobilize the poem

for political ends. Frank Lentricchia, for example, argues that the poem highlights the need to move beyond picking a side but still claims the poem represents “two kinds of people” (106), the imaginative and the unimaginative. Similarly, John C. Kemp’s reading of the poem as a place of “rivalry and competition” (20), while nuanced, ultimately sees it as a contrast between men with different “modes of thought” (24).

This assumption that “Mending Wall” presents two distinct sides needs to be interrogated in light of three findings emerging from close attention to the poem. The first is that we only know the neighbor (and his statement “Good fences make good neighbors”) through the speaker’s construction of him, which is based on assumptions the speaker makes about the neighbor having an uncritical approach to the aphorism about good fences. Indeed, he conceives his neighbor in somewhat adversarial terms as “an old-stone savage armed” with the wall-mending stones he is carrying, and he believes the neighbor “moves in darkness . . . / Not of woods only and the shade of trees” (40, 41-2). For the speaker, this darkness is also a refusal to go behind what he assumes is an inherited (“his father’s”) “saying” and what he reads as an unreasonable or unfounded delight in appearing to have “thought of it so well” (43, 44). The speaker’s conclusions about the neighbor seem rooted in his frustration that he himself cannot “put a notion in his [neighbor’s] head” (29), but one wonders how open to discussion the neighbor should be when the speaker’s reigning conception of communication is the rightness of his own position and a concomitant insistence on colonizing the neighbor’s mind with it. What the speaker betrays about his own attitude towards his neighbor and to the prospect of communication with the neighbor does not inspire confidence that his reading of the neighbor’s narrow confinement to an allegedly paternal saying is necessarily an accurate account of the neighbor’s views on the existence and value of walls. This position is also not one he consistently maintains, for it is juxtaposed with other moments in which the speaker seems to enjoy the

activity of wall mending with his neighbor, describing it as a “kind of outdoor game” and somewhat excitedly uttering “a spell” to make the ball-like boulders “balance” on top of the wall (21, 18). Needless to say, we cannot build a critical platform about a poem allegedly juxtaposing two distinct views on walls on the basis of such a highly mediated, inconsistent, and problematic representation of the neighbor and his relationship to the saying “Good fences make good neighbors.”

The speaker’s own position on walls is ostensibly reflected in the phrase, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” a phrase which is highly ambiguous from our perspective and perhaps even ambivalent from his own. The speaker presents himself as an inquiring fellow who asks questions about building walls before he builds them: “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense” (32-4). It is a laudable approach, to be sure, but there is no evidence that he actually asks such questions in relation to the very wall he refers to in the poem. Indeed, it is the speaker who initiates the wall-mending activity each spring, not his ostensibly wall-obsessed neighbor: “I let my neighbor know beyond the hill; / And on a day we meet to walk the line / And set the wall between us once again” (12-4). Furthermore, while the speaker clearly suggests to his neighbor that the wall may not be necessary “[t]here where . . . / He is all pine and I am apple orchard” (23-4, emphasis added), this statement implies that the speaker himself does not have an inherent, wholesale, under-all-circumstances opposition to walls. In fact, he believes that there are areas of the property where a wall is necessary: areas in which, it seems, cows are present. Even as he repeats the aphorism “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” his relationship to the wall being mended is far more ambivalent and ambiguous than is acknowledged in criticism seeking to find two distinct views on walls, their existence, and value in the poem.



Finally, the critical consensus about this poem's opposition between two attitudes towards walls is rooted in an unstated reliance upon the significant linguistic, cultural, and historical weight that these gnomic utterances or aphorisms entail beyond what the two utterers of them may have intended, if these intentions are even recoverable in light of the way the poem is framed and mediated by the speaker. When the speaker assumes that "Good fences make good neighbors" is an inherited saying, he evokes the possibility of past articulations by other utterers and in other contexts.<sup>4</sup> This means that both for him and for us it is difficult to differentiate the neighbor's relationship to the phrase from the accumulated weight of all these possible other utterances. Furthermore, the speaker's own "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," while not as culturally and historically resonant as "Good fences make good neighbors," also carries linguistic and contextual freight beyond what its utterer could have intended: the "[s]omething . . . that doesn't love a wall" is qualified as the "[s]omething . . . / [t]hat sends the frozen-ground-swell under it"--is qualified, in other words, as "frost" (1-2). The speaker is unnamed in the poem, but even if he did share the name "Frost" with his poet, he cannot be aware of his creator, and the significant distance created between the two entails that we cannot equate them or assume they share attitudes and beliefs about walls. Yet the plurisignification of "frost"/"Frost" is inviting, almost teasing us to equate the two, as many critics have done, even though Robert Frost described himself as "both fellows in the poem," suggesting that man (humanity) is, by nature, both "a wall builder and a wall toppler. He makes boundaries and he breaks boundaries. That's man" (*Interviews with Robert Frost*, qtd. in Holland 26). Clearly, both aphorisms are too laden with linguistic, cultural, and historical baggage for any straightforward claims about their utterers' relationships to them to be used as the basis for a reading of the poem that sets two aphorisms up against each other.

What the poem seems to highlight, perhaps more than any wall-related philosophy emerging directly from either of the aphorisms, are various facets of the self-other relation that are highlighted both literally and figuratively by the notion of walls: the problem of other minds, the desire for and barriers to connection, and the potential and limitations of language as a vehicle for communication. As Norman Holland notes, the poem serves as a fantasy of closeness to an Other, but, as Mark Richardson observes, the poem also foregrounds the “limitations” as well as the “seductions and value” of both walls and aphorisms as vehicles for that connection and closeness (Richardson 142). Readings that describe the aphorisms as walls preventing communication and connection, however, rely on a conception of walls--walls as barriers or enclosures--that the poem itself does not unequivocally endorse. Kemp, for example, regards shibboleth as “a form of mental enclosure” (21), which is a metaphor he takes from the speaker’s desire to see the neighbor “go behind” (Frost 43) the aphorism he repeats, “Good fences make good neighbors.” We should not be too quick to assume that the neighbor uses the saying to shut down conversation just because the speaker makes that assumption. Likewise, we should not be too quick to conclude that if the saying is a wall, it is a wall that separates and isolates. As the poem makes abundantly clear, walls are not only artificial or man-made; they can also be naturally occurring, such as the “hill” that constitutes a natural barrier between the speaker and the neighbor. Likewise, they can be destroyed by humans (“[t]he work of hunters” [5]) and by nature (frost). They also serve different purposes beyond property demarcation, as the poem’s reference to keeping cows out of crops makes clear, and the purposes they serve can be regarded differently depending on the extent to which one is involved in the wall building or mending and the extent to which one regards oneself as being walled in or out, more or less connected with the Other.<sup>5</sup>

Connecting these ideas about the complexities of walls to the idea of the aphorisms as walls, we may then regard the aphorisms not necessarily, or at least not exclusively, as walls that separate and isolate but instead--or at least as well--as walls that function as “places of communication and exchange” that bring people together (Sarup 98). In doing so, we may draw upon Frost scholars’ references to the Terminus myth, the Roman festival in which walls bring a community together, and their articulation of the paradox that the very existence of wall-breakers and mischief-makers may depend upon the existence of walls to be broken or subjected to mischief (Monteiro, “Unlinked Myth”; Poirier; Holland). While clichés can suggest a common linguistic and cultural ground, even just as a point of resistance, the aphorisms in the poem ultimately do not foster mutual understanding between the speaker and the neighbor; instead, they merely exacerbate the inherent unknowability of the other mind. It does not, however, necessarily follow that the poem as a whole presents an entirely negative vision of aphorisms as walls. Rather, language functions as a wall in the poem in the sense that it brings together even as it obstructs.

In this vein, we might then regard the entire poem’s communicative gesture as a wall. Frost himself, when asked about the intended meaning of “Mending Wall,” declared that his poems “are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless,” like the “blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries” he had a habit of leaving, “since infancy,” “where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark” (qtd. in Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* 125-6). Paradoxically, it is these obstructions that trigger, or even facilitate, a movement towards the “boundless” beyond obstructions. If we follow Frost in seeing “Mending Wall” as something that people trip and fall *forwards* over and recall the poem’s opening image of a rural wall that hunters have damaged, likely by hastily tripping forwards over it during the hunt, “[t]o please the yelping dogs” (9), we might see the poem in wall-like terms. In other words, it is

not only a wall as in “barrier to understanding,” but also a wall that temporarily arrests progress and then, in fact, propels one *forward*. Critical readings that privilege one aphorism over another, or champion either the speaker or his neighbor, fail to move forward our understanding of the existence and value of walls. They merely reinforce received, simplistic, and polarizing views about them. Frost himself articulated concerns about what Raab calls “applied” uses of the poem:

Returning from a visit to Russia late in his life, Frost said, ‘The Russians reprinted “Mending Wall” over there, and left that first line off.’ He added wryly, ‘I don’t see how they got the poem started.’ What the Russians needed, and so took, was the poem’s other detachable statement: ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’ They applied what they wanted. (Raab 203)

Frost also commented on the irreducibility of the poem as a product of its reliance on “formulae [aphorisms] that won’t formulate--that almost but don’t quite formulate” (qtd. in Raab 204).

When he suggests we might trip and fall *forwards* over his poem, Frost proposes a notion of the poem as a spatial construct, which challenges us to reflect on what we do as readers when we navigate the poem. Rather than trying to pin down meaning in the poem, or offer yet another reductive and selective “practical use” of the poem, we seek, to paraphrase Wollaefer, a flexible and mobile conceptual approach to the poem. This approach would entail both acknowledging, as we have tried to do above, the plurisignification of walls in the poem, and attending to other, overlooked aspects of Frost’s spatial metaphor.

## NEIGHBORS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

What if, for example, we shift our attention to another, related component of the metaphor and consider not the walls themselves but the people who are on the sides of them and divided by

them, who make them and are made by them, and who love and do not love them? The repeated refrain “good fences make good neighbors” obviously asks us to consider the metaphor of the fence, but it places equal emphasis on the concept of the neighbor. “Mending Wall” depicts neighbors who share a common landscape and, to some extent, common rituals, who meet to mend the wall, and in doing so play “just another kind of outdoor game” (21). However, the relationship of neighbors is not only, or primarily, about these similarities and commonalities but also allows room for differences, oppositions, and tension. Neighbors, after all, as Frost’s speaker attests to, can be good and bad. We can best understand the unique facets of the idea of the neighbor in comparison to two other kinds of human relationships: family and friendship. The idea of family evokes ties of blood or social contract that are stable and binding. Friendship, on the other hand, is non-binding. Furthermore, it is predicated on the acknowledgement of difference, even as it imagines connecting across that difference. The model of the neighbor allows even more room for difference than friendship, as neighbors do not necessarily seek kinship but rather coexist in uneasy, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes mutually supportive nearness. Neighbors constitute a provisional, non-binding, open community.

The neighborhood offers a promisingly flexible and mobile metaphor for the already spatial metaphor-inclined modernist studies. Robert Frost is, as we have noted above, a writer who is generally thought *not* to be a modernist or to be only peripherally modernist. What happens, we have asked in this essay, if we move or look over pre-existing definitional boundaries and view him as one? We have thus brought Frost into the neighborhood of modernism and, in doing so, have altered the dominant metaphor for organizing or even gatekeeping modernist studies. In picking Frost, we have picked a neighbor, not a family member. After all, the dominant critical metaphor for imagining the relationship between divergent modernist texts is Wittgenstein’s model of family resemblances. For Wollaeger, family

resemblances “make multiple modernisms recognizable as members of a class” (11). He sees them as offering “a polythetic form of classification in which the aim is to specify a set of criteria, subsets of which are enough to constitute a sense of decentered resemblance” (12). However, even when resemblance is decentered, it is still privileged in this model. Furthermore, specifying criteria in advance risks circumscribing what might be found: we find only what our search parameters permit us to find when we seek similarity. Friedman notes this possible pitfall when she declares that “[d]efining historical periods and conditions or movements in the arts and writing depends upon a circular process . . . . Put differently, definitional mapping relies upon prior assumptions of where the boundary belongs, assumptions that reflect the preexisting beliefs or standpoint of the mapmaker” (“Definitional Excursions” 507-8). The family resemblance metaphor evokes genetic fixity: traits are there, waiting to be identified and interpreted. When we eschew a model based on similarities, the model of neighboring means that there are few preexisting or circumscribed limits to what can be noticed.

Relying as it does on ideas of provisional and temporary community as well as proximity and shared or at least adjacent territories, the neighborhood is a spatial construct that accommodates difference, tension, and even antagonism. It thus offers ways to retain modernists we are now rather embarrassed, skeptical, or even horrified about (Pound, Lewis, and other fascist enthusiasts spring to mind) in our modernist community without either diminishing or compromising with their unpalatable attributes. The model of the neighborhood allows us to view such modernist figures with critical and ethical distance while still acknowledging their roles in shaping modernism. It also, as we have noted above in reference to Frost, makes room for wayward modernists who are often left out of both traditional and new modernist configurations. In this way, the neighborhood concept both alters the dominant organizing metaphor for modernist studies and offers new possibilities for the ways in which we undertake

critical work in the field. The ramifications are especially important for comparative work: the neighbor model might help scholars avoid the pitfalls Irene Ramalho Santos identifies when she cautions that comparative work needs to be careful not to intensify separations between distinct traditions. She notes that “[t]he very disciplines that recently emerged for building bridges and establishing comparisons among literatures continue, in general, to assume that such bridges and comparisons occur between integral, preconstituted entities” (4). Santos emphasizes instead the “heteroreferentiality” (4) of literatures. The model of modernism as a neighborhood accommodates this heteroreferentiality by allowing us to make unacknowledged, unexpected, and perhaps illuminating connections.

As a next step, we might ask what happens if we make Frost a neighbor with other modernist writers. If we make him a neighbor specifically with other modernist writers that use walls as metaphors in their texts, then we can find points of connection across divergent historical moments, national or cultural contexts, or genders. For example, in Henry James’ *Portrait of a Lady*, walls represent the stifling boundaries of convention when Isabel Archer sees her life as a “dark, narrow alley, with a wall at the end” (391). Walls are similarly confining for Jean Rhys’ Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* who looks up at a painting on the wall of her rented room: the painting depicts two children, “a tidy green tree,” and “a shiny pale-blue sky,” and, seeing “a high, dark wall behind the little girl,” Anna thinks, “it was the wall that mattered” (127). In Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, religious, socio-cultural, economic, and physical barriers both wall Bakha off from the world and, ironically, protect him from angry people who wish to harm him but will not allow themselves to break through the wall of untouchability. These few briefly sketched out examples suggest possibilities for readings that would enrich our understanding of how modes of walling and territorial demarcations function in modernism and potentially reinvigorate modernist debates around, for example, convention, colonialism, and

internationalism. In another move, we could consider ideas around community formation and self-other relations in order to make Frost neighbors with figures like E. M. Forster or Virginia Woolf. In Forster's *A Room with a View*, Cecil ruminates on the "irremovable barriers" between himself and others and notes that "It makes a difference, doesn't it, whether we fence ourselves in, or whether we are fenced out by the barriers of others?" (Forster 91). Woolf imagines a model of neighborly connection when she depicts Clarissa Dalloway looking out of her window to see the old woman in the house opposite and thinking, "And the supreme mystery was merely this: here was one room; there another" (108).

We began this essay by illuminating the hitherto unacknowledged pervasiveness of spatial discourse in recent modernist criticism--recurrent terms, concepts, and images, at times overlapping and at times contesting metaphors. There is something inherently spatial about the New Modernist Studies. By proposing an overarching spatial metaphor--that of the neighborhood--we are neither aiming simply to add to a proliferation of spatial discourse, nor are we abandoning the wall in favour of the neighborhood. Rather, walls and other kinds of borders and demarcations are integral parts of neighborhoods. Within and surrounding neighborhoods, there are different kinds of demarcations, including fences (chain-link or picket), garden hedges, or even flowerbeds. There are man-made, natural, and natural but cultivated boundaries. Some boundaries are porous or transparent, and others are high and impenetrable. There are different ways of looking over or across them--or not. Different demarcations have different roles and affordances; they enable and disable different relationships and forms of relationality among those that build and live within or without them. If, in our criticism, instead of assuming a high or impenetrable wall between, for example, Frost and Forster--two writers divided by genre, geography, and theme--we imagine a garden-hedge relationship, then we are afforded the possibility of seeing perhaps unacknowledged connection and exchange.



The model of modernism as a neighborhood emphasizes the notion of shared territory. Within that shared territory, modernist writers and texts exist in various degrees of nearness and adjacency to one another, and, if we look at modernism as a shared space, we weigh their potential responses to and responsibilities towards one another as well as their multiple possible ethical relationships. There is perhaps, too, something to gain from conceiving of our own critical territory as a neighborhood--a neighborly model of criticism where, instead of concentrating on the ideological walls that divide us from one another, we pay attention to the territory we share and how we communally tend to it. And, in a final move, we might even regard ourselves as kinds of neighbors to modernism itself, thus acknowledging that the very performance of criticism is not predicated on distance but on a reach across distance in order to establish or recognize common ground and accept the responsibilities entailed therein. None of this is to say that the neighborhood is inherently utopian. In fact, what is so appealing about the neighborhood model is that it can fold in multiple and perhaps seemingly incompatible approaches.

The neighborhood model thus allows us to see modernism in a new way, encompasses and organizes what we observe in modernist criticism, and reorients our own critical and ethical relationships with our field. Throughout this essay, we have sketched out briefly some of the connections we can imagine making with a modernism as neighborhood model. The spatial metaphor of the neighborhood allows us to regard modernism as a loose network, a collection of smaller interrelated clusters, or even a constellation of individuals. In its accommodation of difference as well as similarity, neighborhood is vision of community that includes uneasy groupings, difficult-to-fit figures, and outright contestation. As a model for thinking about modernism it is contingent, provisional, capacious, and mobile. Its mobility and contingency allow room for radically different conceptions of what a neighborhood is and invite us to ask

ourselves what kind of neighborhood we imagine modernism to be in any given iteration: what we, as modernism's critics and neighbors, are "walling in" or "walling out."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> New book series include Bloomsbury's New Modernisms and Historicizing Modernism, Edinburgh's Critical Studies in Modernist Culture, Penn State's Refiguring Modernism, Oxford's Modernist Literature and Culture, Columbia's Modernist Latitudes, Texas' Literary Modernism, and deGruyter's European Avant-Garde and Modernism. New edited collections include Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska's two-volume *Modernism* (2007), Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's *Bad Modernisms* (2006), Pamela Caughie's *Disciplining Modernism* (2010), and Mark Wollaeger's *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012). New textbooks or companions to modernism include Peter Childs' *Modernism* (3rd edition, 2016), Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat's *Modernism: Keywords* (2014), Mary Ann Gillies and Aurelea Denise Mahood's *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> From the Modernist Studies Association's mandate: "Since those early conversations in the 1990s, the Modernist Studies Association has continued to break down reified categories and disciplinary silos in the academy. As an organization, and a publishing venue with *Modernism/modernity*, MSA has always invited and continues to invite scholars to look past the walls of their departments and individual disciplines, and to address the relations between not merely individual authors or artists, but among various aspects of culture."

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900-1930* (2015); Miriam Thaggett, *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (2010); Shashi Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism: Writing Romans a Clef Between the Wars* (2011); Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow, and the Literary Canon* (2014); Alex Latter, *Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer: On the Poetics of Community* (2015); Jessica R. Feldman, *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (2002); Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, editors, *Gothic Modernisms* (2001); Beatrice Monaco, *Machinic Modernism: The Deleuzian Literary Machines of Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce* (2008); Monica Latham, *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting Mrs Dalloway* (2015); Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> George Monteiro argues in "Robert Frost's Linked Analogies" (1973) that Frost's "Good fences make good neighbors" is a proverb dating at least as far back as medieval Spain.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Nash further develops this notion of the contingency of walls when she points to their seasonality in rural New England--one would abide by them as demarcation points in the season in which crops grow, but one would not expect them to be honored in the same way in winter.

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# Plot Counter Plot: Genetics and Generic Strain in the Modernist Novel of Formation

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## ABSTRACT

Historically, modernism coincides with the rise of modern genetics, which undermine and complicate but also enable positive new visions of the individual. Modern (Neo-Darwinian and Mendelian) genetics differ from earlier hereditary theories by positing a radical division between the operations of inheritance (at the molecular level) and the processes of individual development (at the somatic level). This basic division inheres in modernist *Bildungsromane* that engage thematically with reproduction and heredity; their dominant plot of individual development is therefore supplemented with a more or less antagonistic plot of genealogical continuity. In such *genic novels*, as I call this group of *Bildungsromane*, the two plots interact dialogically, producing formal disturbances to the linear, progressive plot of self-formation and enabling the possibility of real development for characters once barred from the ideals of *Bildung*. The essay links the modernist origins of the genic novel to its growing presence in contemporary literature.

## KEYWORDS

Modernism, *Bildungsroman*, Development, Reproduction, genetics, August Weismann, Gregor Mendel

As to heredity, it is a mystical expression for a fiction.

—Wilhelm Johannsen, “The Genotype Conception of Heredity” (1911)

This hereditary business is too awful.

—E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey* (1907)

Modernism is still associated largely with form. Yet its formal innovations coincide with content that was equally new and challenging. So how does “modernist content” relate to form and style? How do new forms enable new themes, heroisms, and conflicts? Locating the origins of high modernism in “the modernism of content” of Edwardian novelists, Jane Miller argues that their attempts “to write about women in new ways, and to challenge ideas about gender and marriage, ... forced them to attend to and subsequently reshape narrative form” (7). One intriguing implication of this insight is Miller’s suggestion that modernist content means unorthodox relations in courtship, sex, marriage, procreation, and inheritance—relations with formal linguistic and narrative correlates. When Virginia Woolf praises the (invented) novelist Mary Carmichael, it is for her novel’s “tampering” with syntax and plot (“first she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence”) and thus for its disjoining of the genealogical structures that dominate Western thought more generally (*Room* 88). Such disjunctions, argues Edward Said, are typical of twentieth-century fiction, which replaces “the set of relationships linked together by familiar analogy: father and son, the image, the process of genesis, a story” with “the brother, discontinuous concepts, paragenesis, construction. The first of this series is dynastic, bound to sources and origins, mimetic. The relationships holding in the second series are complementarity and adjacency” (66). By contrasting realist filiation realism and modernist affiliation, Said uncovers formal logic in modernist texts that may seem formless and reveals common ground between modernism and the critical strategies of feminist, postcolonial, and queer writing.

Starkly opposing filiation and affiliation, however, can obscure the fact that reproduction and genealogy remain important in modernist fiction. This tendency reflects a more general bias

towards the newness of modernism at the expense of its continuities with history, including literary history. Many critics thus approve Fielding's declaration in *A Passage to India*—"I'd far rather leave a thought behind me than a child" (130)—as if his admittedly ambiguous conciliation with Aziz later in the novel weren't predicated on the news of his unborn "son and heir" (303). Reproduction remains central in modernist fiction, which is not to say its meanings are constant. Sexual mores and education changed; censorship was relaxed or easier to circumvent; feminism challenged assumptions about gender; anthropology, sexology, and psychoanalysis moved sexuality, at least partly, from the moral and the absolute to the cultural, the relative, and the statistical. How modernism reflects and participates in these changes is well established. Less familiar are the ways in which modernism responds thematically and formally to a kindred change in perspective: the radical reformulations of heredity around the turn of the twentieth century.

This essay surveys modernist novels that engage more or less obviously with biological phenomena of reproduction and heredity, and explores how these engagements might produce modernist forms and critiques. I call such novels *genic*—pertaining specifically to genes—because their biological engagements and the resulting thematic and formal effects result from a distinctly modern *genetic* as opposed to broadly genealogical view of inheritance. This is not, of course, to privilege biology's influence on modernism, nor naively to isolate the science from its inevitable entwinement with culture and ideology. I focus on biology in order to redress its relative absence in modernist scholarship, which tends to emphasize if anything its sinister applications (eugenics, scientific racism).<sup>1</sup> Though crucial, such studies often overlook the richness and critical power that modernists might have recognized in the science itself.

In this essay I limit my corpus of genic novels to the *Bildungsroman*, a genre that includes many Victorian and modernist novels and thus provides a fairly well-defined standard against which to view historical shifts and tendencies. What's more, the *Bildungsroman* presents the nexus of form and content with special, perhaps even unique clarity: as Marc Redfield puts it, "the

‘content’ of the *Bildungsroman* instantly becomes a question of form, precisely because the content is the forming-of-content, ‘Bildung’” (42). Most importantly, the *Bildungsroman*’s primary concerns with individual self-formation put it at odds with the genealogical imperative. As Bradley Clissold argues, the “genre unwittingly locates itself amid emerging theories of hereditary transmission” and, as a result, “productive tensions” attend to the collision of “the future-oriented development of the protagonist ... with the scientific view of the individual as a nexus of deterministic forces and a carrier of a composite past” (195, 197).<sup>2</sup> Agreeing with Clissold, I argue in this essay that the modernist *Bildungsroman* derives some of its key manoeuvres from the estranging insights of modern genetics, which radically reconfigures the conflict between *Bildung* and reproduction. In the frameworks that dominate turn-of-the-century theories of inheritance, individual growth and genetic transmission are effectively separate processes. Exploiting their separation, modernist fiction can explore the many ways in which the two processes intersect, diverge, or collide. Although the shattering effects of genetics on the self are perhaps more visible in fiction from the present age of cloning and bioengineering, when “selfish genes,” “memes,” and “going viral” are ubiquitous if often vague concepts, they emerged in modernist *Bildungsromane*. Aside from altering the individual’s relation to genealogy, modern genetics enabled several even more radical separations, differentiating genetic identity from embodied existence, separating the possibility of genetic survival from the choices and orientations of individual sexual life, redefining even such a seemingly stable category as biological sex as a dynamic and changeable state. For modernist as for contemporary fiction, the implications for the self are both troubling and liberating, sometimes both at once.

## GENEALOGY AND THE NOVEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Of the major novelistic genres, the *Bildungsroman* seems especially singular in plot structure and individualistic by virtue of its focus on a single character. Yet it has always been strained, more or less subtly, by dialogic tensions between individual and genealogical factors. On the one hand, as

Bakhtin argues in his essay on the *Bildungsroman*, “biographical life is impossible outside the larger epoch, which goes beyond the limits of a single life, whose duration is represented primarily by *generations*” (18); on the other hand, Moretti counters, the possibility of *Bildung* depends on the “dismantling [of] the continuity between the generations” (4). Among the societal and national duties of a citizen is the production of offspring (Krimmer 258), which is also, however, framed as the end of development. This quandary is especially stark for those whose right to citizenship is tenuous or denied. According to early theorists of *Bildung*, for example, women lacked the potential for a full cultural and thus political life because of their bodily investments in parenting (Konje 7). More generally, reproduction checks the progressiveness of *Bildung* because it is cyclical: all I learned my progeny must learn again from scratch. In any case, classical *Bildungsromane* tend to conceal this complication by making their protagonists parentless (Jane Eyre, Pip, Jude Fawley, Tom Sawyer), fatherless (Arthur Pendennis, David Copperfield), or symbolically orphaned (Wilhelm Meister, Fanny Price, Maisie Farange); the few who procreate tend to lose the child early (Frédéric Moreau, Tess Durbeyfield). As Mary Jean Corbett observes, “orphans and wards ... have formal advantages, to be sure, for the favored plot of bildung” (88). In many cases, Victorian *Bildungsromane* find closure in the reconstitution of family, either by rediscovering parents (Oliver Twist), marrying (Jane Eyre), or both (Eppie Marner, Esther Summerson). The fact that the great nineteenth-century *Bildungsromane* conceal genealogical dynamics may explain why A. E. Zucker, when he describes the recent emergence of “the genealogical novel” in a 1928 essay, defines this “new genre” in contrast with “the biographical novel,” which “deal[s] ... with a single hero” (551). The genealogical novel, argues Zucker, arose as a distinct form “as a direct result of the widespread discussion of Evolution during the third quarter of the nineteenth century and the new interest aroused in the doctrine of heredity” (551). Its first specimens, according to Zucker, are Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* (1873–84, published 1903) and Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series (1871–1893) and some of its contemporary versions

Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), Galworthy's *Forsythe Saga* (1906–1921), and Rose Macauley's *Told by an Idiot* (1923).

But Zucker's contrast between genealogy and biography is problematic. It obscures the very feature that makes heredity a powerful new force in modern fiction. Zola's novels don't trade biography for genealogy; they embed biographies within a genealogical frame. *The Way of All Flesh* spans four generations of Pontifexes, but its focus is on Ernest Pontifex's education and struggles to escape his family. In some cases, such as Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, the plot of individual formation takes up so much narrative space that the genealogical plot is reduced to a framing device. This doesn't prevent genealogy from impinging strongly on its protagonists.

Without the biographical plot, a genealogical sequence would strain the limits of narrative.

Witness the following passage from Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953):

the poor old lousy old earth, my earth and my father's and my mother's and my father's father's and my mother's mother's and my father's mother's and my mother's father's and my father's mother's father's and my mother's father's mother's and my father's mother's mother's and my mother's father's father's and my father's father's mother's and my mother's mother's father's and my father father's father's and my mother's mother's mother's and other people's fathers' and mothers' and fathers' mothers' and mothers' fathers' and fathers' mothers' fathers' and mothers' fathers' mothers' and fathers' mothers' mothers' and mothers' fathers' fathers' and fathers' fathers' mothers' and mothers' mothers' father's and fathers' fathers' fathers' and mothers' mothers' mothers'. (46–47)

Beckett embraces the anti-narrative outcome of dissociating genealogy from individual development (similar genealogical lists in the Bible avoid the Beckettian breakdown by serving as links between prophets and patriarchs). Zucker's claim for a new genre founded on “the doctrine of heredity” thus needs both reviving and revising. Instead of dividing “genealogical” and “biographical” novels, I argue that heredity has its most significant effects in biographical novels

that enable heredity to complicate the narrative of individual development. These novels are exploded *Bildungsromane*, their plot of individual formation frustrated by the distinctly modern conception of heredity as a molecular process separate from organismal development.

My depiction of the genic novel echoes Richard Dawkins' rather Bakhtinian claim that while reproductive cycles are "proceeding forwards in evolutionary time," the processes of individual growth "are proceeding sideways" (256). Our persons and our genes embody time differently: developmental and genealogical chronotopes occupy distinct temporal and spatial scales (personal and macroscopic versus evolutionary and microscopic), though they necessarily intersect.<sup>3</sup> The genic novel is therefore dialogic, in that it contains two incommensurable "generically typical plot-generating chronotopes" that give form to two overlapping but conflicting temporalities: "the time of human life, [and] of historical time" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 251, 250).<sup>4</sup> In a genic novel, then, the dialogic interaction of the two chronotopes prevents either genealogical or individual plot from reaching closure and, given the form-giving power of endings, rescues the narrative complexities of the whole narrative from being retroactively streamlined and ordered into coherence. Thus while Zucker's list of genealogical novels, including twentieth-century examples, tends aesthetically toward realism, the genic novel favours a modernist aesthetics of fragmentation, multiplicity, and indeterminism.

In its most basic form, the genic novel pits *Bildung* against reproduction itself. Few novels illustrate the conflict better than D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915). When Tom Brangwen adopts Anna early in the novel, she takes over as focal character; what had begun as a family novel seems to become a *Bildungsroman*.<sup>5</sup> But when she marries Will and becomes pregnant, the narrative shifts again: "With satisfaction she relinquished the adventure to the unknown. She was bearing her children" (238). This renunciation is only exacerbated by Ursula's birth: "her palpable and immediate future was the child. If her soul had found no utterance, her womb had" (249). If *Bildung* is a soul's unfolding, this alternative uterine "utterance" marks a shift in both characterization and genre: Anna is demoted from focal character to "a door and a threshold"

for “another soul ... to stand upon” (238) while the plot reverts to the genealogical. Because Anna’s “long trance of child-bearing had kept her young and undeveloped” (401–02), she is soon outpaced by Ursula. Most remarkable about Lawrence’s equation of reproduction and underdevelopment is that it applies equally to men. Fatherhood makes Will “aware of ... something unformed in his very being... which would never develop” (252). “Will” is now simply “the father,” “Anna” just “the mother” (316); as parents “they [a]re neither of them quite personal, quite defined as individuals, so much [a]re they pervaded by the physical heat of breeding and rearing their young” (402).

No wonder the modernist heroine rebels. “[E]nraged” to see her mother “so utterly fulfilled in her breeding” (401), Ursula forms her self against the backdrop of a large family and rejects the very notion of procreation. When she discovers “a Rubens picture with storms of naked babies ... called ‘Fecundity,’ she shuddered, and the word became abhorrent to her” (309). Ursula makes “Fecundity” the foil for her self-determination. The crisis of her narrative is therefore fittingly when she thinks she is pregnant by her lover Anton Skrebensky. The very thought triggers a conflict within her: “her flesh thrilled, but her soul was sick,” an echo of the divergent “utterance[s]” of Anna’s “womb” and “soul” (536, 249). Though Ursula briefly considers motherhood—asking herself “what did the self, the form of life, matter?”—she finally demurs because she sees “this child” as “the seal set on her own nullity” (536). Later, the announcement that “there would be no child: she was glad” (546) coincides with the rediscovery of Ursula’s developmental potential: whereas Anna had “relinquished the adventure to the unknown” by fulfilling the procreative plot (238), Ursula is relieved and motivated to be venturing still towards “the unknown, unexplored, the undiscovered upon whose shore she had landed, alone” (546). *Bildung* shakes itself free by refusing what Paul Morrison calls “the master narrative of civilization itself,” “the process by which children become parents who (re)produce children who becomes [sic] parents—the process, that is, by which the social order achieves stasis through the illusion of generational opposition and change—is nothing less than the



master narrative of civilization itself” (259). Breaking the cycle, Ursula generates enough developmental momentum to propel the four *Bildung* plots of *Women in Love* (1920).

For all its modernism of form and of content, *The Rainbow*’s genealogical conflicts involve relations between singular, coherent human characters—Anna and Will, Ursula and Anna, or Ursula and Anton. The peculiarities of the genic novel really emerge when the conflict includes the vexed coexistence of human characters and another kind of character: a genetically-determined trait or, by metonymy, the genetic material itself. It is the genic novel’s special innovation to divert at least some of the *Bildungsroman*’s tensions away from the self’s encounter with others in the outside world and towards the self’s encounter with the particles known, since 1909, as genes.

## MODERN GENETICS AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Heredity was challenging the ideals of *Bildung* even as it was being theorized by Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, and others in the late eighteenth century (Lehleiter 11). *Bildung* implies autonomy and self-integrity, and thus, as Sherrin Berezowsky notes, “to acknowledge the role of heredity would be to undermine the didactic and hopeful qualities of biography” (826). That said, the troubling implications of heredity could be dismissed so long as inheritance was viewed as a kind of self-perpetuation, and until well into the nineteenth century biologists and laypeople alike viewed “heredity as the *identity* between parent and offspring” (Olby 62). In Shakespeare’s procreation sonnets, fatherhood guarantees survival in “another self,” in a “copy” (1845). Even the Lamarckian model of the inheritance of acquired characteristics,<sup>6</sup> which dominated the nineteenth century, blurs individual and lineage. Thus Samuel Butler, who equated heredity with memory, argues that “we can apprehend neither the beginning nor the end of our personality, which comes up out of infinity as an island out of the sea, so gently, that none can say when it is first visible on our mental horizon, and fades away in the case of those who leave offspring, so imperceptibly that none can say when it is out of sight” (104). Though more sophisticated than

previous models of reproduction as replication, Lamarckism also posits personal survival beyond bodily death and fosters the flattering notion of individual agency as the motor for creative evolution. It is a comforting idea that a record of my personality will survive in and indeed shape future generations, but the facts were clearly tipping the scale against Lamarckian inheritance by the late 1800s.

No such comfort is possible in the alternative model proposed by August Weismann in 1883. Strongly anti-Lamarckian, Weismann argued that “the inheritance of acquired characters has never been proved” and therefore repudiated the naïve view of “reproduction as ‘an overgrowth of the individual,’ and ... heredity as a simple continuity of growth” (*Essays* 81, 72). Instead, he posited an impermeable boundary between the individual body (soma) and the genetic material (germ-plasm). While most theorists saw heredity as the flow of forces, essences, or memories (Olby 63), Weismann posited the transmission of physical particles that travel unchanged through a genealogical succession of mortal bodies.<sup>7</sup> Writing in 1911, Wilhelm Johannsen would note that “the view of inheritance as . . . the transmission of the parent’s (or ancestor’s) *personal qualities* to the progeny, is the most naïve and oldest conception of heredity.” In this obsolete view, my parents are the *cause* of my traits. By contrast, “the modern view of heredity” attributes to the traits of the parents and the offspring to a common cause: “*the reactions of the gametes* joining to form a zygote” (Johannsen 130)—that is, the genetic material.

Lamarckism saw personal and genealogical existence as different aspects of the same continuous life. Weismann countered that reproduction is the mediating process between the fundamentally different organic processes of individuation and heredity. For unicellular lifeforms like bacteria, which have no body per se, reproduction is simple replication, mere copying that ensures a kind of immortality. Complex organisms, however, “have lost this power of unending life by being constructed of numerous cells, and by the consequent division of labour which became established between the various cells of the body” (Weismann, *Essays* 111). As a result, the task of reproductive replication has been delegated to one type of cell—the sex-cells or

“germ-plasm”—while the cells and tissues of the rest of the body—or soma—perform such tasks as nutrition, growth, locomotion, cognition, social interaction, swooning in love and making art. “Reproduction,” writes Weismann,

takes place by means of cell-division, but every cell does not possess the power of reproducing the whole organism. The cells of the organism are differentiated into two essentially different groups, the reproductive cells ova or spermatozoa, and the somatic cells, or cells of the body, in the narrower sense. The immortality of the unicellular organism has only passed over to the former; the others must die, and since the body of the individual is chiefly composed of them, it must die also. (*Essays* 111)<sup>8</sup>

In the illustration reproduced below, Geddes and Thomson offer a stark representation of Weismann’s “conception of a continuous necklace-like chain of sex-cells ... upon which the mortal individual organisms arise and drop away like so many separate and successive pendants [sic]” (239). The broken line at the top is the germ, travelling unmodified down the generations; the complex forms hanging off the germ-line are successive individual bodies, cellular outgrowths triggered by the meeting of the tadpole-like sperm and the large circular ovum.

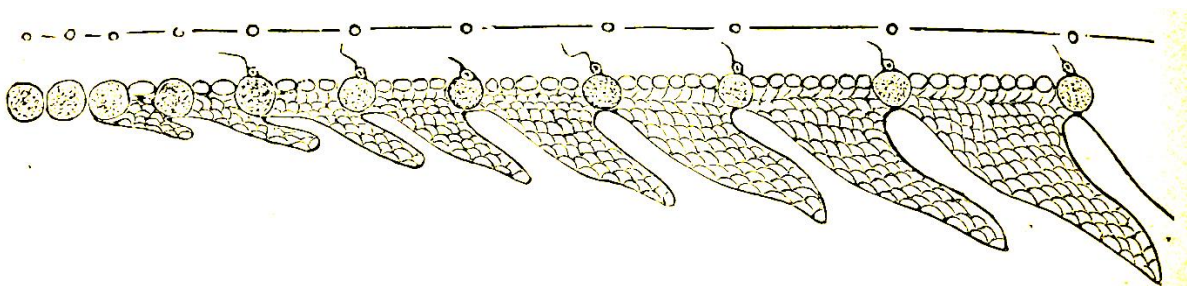


Figure 1: A schematic illustration of Weismann’s division of germ (top) and soma (bottom). While successive bodies grow out of the fertilized eggs (larger circles), the germ continues unchanged from generation to generations. Reproduced from Geddes and Thomson (278).

An early literary reference to Weismannism crops up in Zola’s *Docteur Pascal* (1893), whose titular character “had the intuition of the theory with which Weismann would later

triumph; he had come to the idea of an extremely fine and complex substance, the germ plasm, of which a part always remains in each new being in order to be transmitted, invariable and immutable, from generation to generation” (55). Italo Svevo suggests a Weismannian outlook in *Zeno’s Conscience* (1923) when Zeno segregates a newborn’s personal identity from its genetic legacy: “Poor baby!—you are the blood relation of people I know. The minutes you are now passing may actually be pure, but all the centuries that prepared for your coming were certainly not” (6). Though not “about” modern genetics, Svevo’s and many other similar passages in modernist fiction seek to effect a separation between the genealogical part of the organism and the individual “you that had no hereditary destiny” (Sinclair 359).

The clearest literary articulation of Weismann’s model is Thomas Hardy’s poem “Heredity” (1917). Hardy adumbrates the estranging effect of the conflict between individual and genealogy:

I am the family face;  
Flesh perishes, I live on,  
Projecting trait and trace  
Through time to times anon,  
And leaping from place to place  
Over oblivion. (1–6)

One voice tells two stories, one explicit and the other merely adumbrated. The latter concerns the familiar protagonists of most narratives: the mortal human characters whose lives fill merely “the span / of human durance” (9–10). The former concerns a supra-individual entity operating at microscopic spatial and evolutionary temporal scales. The poem thus beautifully reveals the double-plotting of the genic novel, especially the unsettling notion first posited by August Weismann in 1883, of genes moving from body to body “over [the individual’s] oblivion.” By giving the lyric “I” not to the human but to heredity, moreover, Hardy fully exploits the unsettling aspects of genetics. To “heredity,” the individual is merely a stopover among many others, much as hotel rooms might be for a commercial traveller. This perspective, Dawkins observes, “sweep[s] the individual organism from its pedestal” (194).

Protagonists in nineteenth-century genealogical novels can fight heredity only by either recusing their selves from the genealogical line or by submerging their selves in it: Ernest Pontifex puts his children up for adoption to protect them from his hereditary habits, while Étienne Lantier in *Germinal* (1885) abandons his goals, education, and even personality by backsliding into hereditary alcoholism. By contrast, modernist characters seek to divide their individuality from the equally real forces of reproduction and inheritance, a model that approximates even when it doesn't follow directly from Weismannism. The result, from a narrative perspective, is complicated but not necessarily negative. Isolating the genetic from the somatic opens a space for individual self-determination beyond the inexorable conservatism of genetic repetition, even as it allows heredity to check the myths of untrammelled individualism. The incommensurability of the two plot levels, moreover, means that genic novels tend to be more or less blatantly incoherent in structure. In Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), for example, the narrative is riven by the contrary impulses of linear self-directed growth on one hand and hereditary repetition on the other. "It is hard to live down the tempers we are born with," observes the narrator, setting up a Steinian paradox in which "each one is a separate one and yet always repeated" (3, 362). This is not the hell of living with family. It's the hell of "one" living with one's own "tempers," a part of the self that is also of other people—relatives and ancestors.

This hell is familiar to Stephen Dedalus, protagonist of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This novel, often treated as the *Bildungsroman*'s "twentieth-century apotheosis" (Berman 118), seems at first glance to treat heredity casually. Unlike *The Rainbow*, its narrative maps neatly onto Stephen's development: it spans the period from late infancy to early adulthood, showing nothing before his birth and allowing none of his own offspring to cut off his growth. Yet within this individual frame the novel occasionally allows the irruption of a genealogical remainder. As such, *A Portrait* is a formal, thematic, and characterological prequel to the "Oxen of the Sun" episode of *Ulysses*, which alludes explicitly to Weismannism: "modern

science has conclusively shown that only the plasmic substance can be said to be immortal” (399). This allusion is directly pertinent to Stephen’s *Bildung*, the focus of *A Portrait*. So it is fitting that in *Ulysses* it is spoken by Lynch, Stephen’s whetstone during the aesthetic discussion in *A Portrait*. When Stephen appropriates reproductive language for his disembodied aesthetic, Lynch is always on hand to remind him of the recalcitrance of desire, sex, and the body; Lynch’s claim about “plasmic substance” in *Ulysses* is an extension of his sardonic and bawdy rejoinders to Stephen in *Portrait* and a reminder of genealogical dynamics that lurk, subtly but never invisibly, below the surface of the more obvious *Bildung* plot. This is not to say that Joyce favours reproductive Lynch over developmental Stephen, only that Lynch supplies a necessary dialogic counterpart to Stephen’s perspective. The same function is performed by another future medical student, Temple, who enigmatically asks Stephen “Do you believe in the law of heredity?” (230). Temple follows his question by quoting “the most profound sentence ever written,” whose source is “the end of the zoology. Reproduction is the beginning of death” (231). Faced with this “sentence” Stephen stays mum, a significant silence linked to his shock, three chapters and more than five years earlier, when he finds the word “Foetus” carved in a desk on which his father Simon once wrote the initials they share: S.D. (89). Given their association with “foetus,” the initials are an unwelcome reminder that Stephen descends from someone, and therefore challenge his “proud sovereignty” (168), much as “fecundity” does for Ursula Brangwen. It is to obscure such challenges that Stephen diverts reproductive language and images into aesthetics, recasts his familial bonds as “the mystical kinship of fosterage,” and casually dismisses his mother’s burden of “nine or ten” children (98, 241). By having other characters speak for “the law of heredity,” however, Joyce undercuts Stephen’s sense of individual autonomy. This thematic irony has a structural counterpart: the genealogical plot may run mostly unseen below the surface of Stephen’s developmental plot, yet it crops up often enough to reveal the reality of dynamics other than the linear progress in which Stephen is so invested.<sup>9</sup>

The “law of heredity” mentioned by Temple is Weismannism, as attested by the source for his quotation: Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson’s *The Evolution of Sex* (1889).<sup>10</sup> Though the book questions Weismann’s anti-Lamarckism (321–22), as a whole it amounts to a restatement of his thesis that the “division of labour” within multicellular organisms “has induced the antithesis of reproductive and somatic cells” (Weismann 146).<sup>11</sup> Where Weismann separates germ-plasm and soma, Geddes and Thomson divide all physiological processes into “the constructive and destructive (anabolism and katabolism) of living matter and protoplasm” (v) and argue that this division is the basis of sexual difference. Males, according to their thesis, are more catabolic, females more anabolic. Linking maleness to destructive physiology may seem to reverse traditional hierarchies, but it is a backhanded feminism at best. These are, after all, the same authors who cite the biological fact of sexual inequality to justify contemporary social structures: “What was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament” (266). Their thesis amounts to the gendering of Weismann’s unchanging germ as female and the developing soma as male. More anabolic, females have energy to spare for gestation and lactation, though the remainder is insufficient for full individuation; the more catabolic males can’t afford to sacrifice much energy to reproduction and thus devote more to their development. Thus, write Geddes and Thomson, “the males, or . . . the more katabolic organisms, are more variable, and therefore . . . are very frequently the leaders in evolutionary progress, while the more anabolic females tend rather to preserve the constancy and integrity of the species; thus, in a word, the general heredity is perpetuated primarily by the female, while variations are introduced by the male” (270).

In *A Portrait*, Stephen’s analogy of artistic creation and sexual reproduction suggests a defensive strategy for asserting his masculinity. If he expends his energy making art, he can evade charges of effeminacy—despite his feminine features (small feet and a “feminine mouth”; Joyce, *Stephen* 29) and his homosexual panic, so persuasively demonstrated by Joseph Valente. His misogyny often also takes the form of reducing women to reproductive functions; in *Stephen*

*Her*, for example, he calls “the girls I see every day.... marsupials” (181). Joyce’s allusions to Geddes and Thomson also occur in other (though, as it turns out, related) contexts, especially when Stephen thinks that “the waves of the rise and fall of empires do not travel with the rapidity of waves of light and it will be perhaps a considerable time before Ireland will be able to understand that the Papacy is no longer going through a period of anabolism” (*Stephen* 152). But this gendered division has its own pitfalls for Stephen as an Irish-Catholic colonial subject.<sup>12</sup> In a long line of scientific racists, Geddes and Thomson justify British paternalism by defining the Celtic race in anabolic (feminized) terms. They can thus explain the demographic paradox of the Irish, “in whom rapid multiplication occurs despite poor food,” as a result of inactivity, “the habit of early marriage,” and “some measure of lowered individuation” (27, 289).<sup>13</sup> In a double-bind typical of colonial or postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, Stephen is unable to assert his individual as a whole; like his adoption of the English language, his biological inheritance creates a conflict between his maleness and his ethnicity that cannot be resolved.

Temple’s question—“do you believe in the law of heredity?” (Joyce, *Portrait* 230)—receives a more sustained response in May Sinclair’s *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), whose protagonist obsesses about her family history of insanity after Mr. Sutcliffe asks her, “You believe in heredity?” (327). While Joyce limits heredity’s haunting to occasional allusions and narrative gaps, Sinclair makes it one of two primary trials in Mary’s development (the other is her manipulative mother). Spurred by Sutcliffe’s question, Mary reads extensively on Victorian theories of heredity (Ribot, Haeckel), but it is a post-Weismannian understanding of heredity that enables her to conceptualize

some part of you that was free. A you that had no hereditary destiny, that had got out of the net, or had never been caught in it.

You could stand aside and look on at its happiness with horror, it didn’t care. It was utterly indifferent to your praise or blame, and the praise or blame of other people; or to your happiness and theirs. It was open to you to own it as your self or to detach



yourself from it in your horror. It was stronger and saner than you. If you chose to set up that awful conflict in your soul that was your own affair.

Perhaps not your own. Supposing the conflict in you was the tug of the generations before you, trying to drag you back to them? Supposing the horror was *their* horror, their fear of defeat?

She had left off being afraid of what might happen to her. It might never happen. And supposing it did, supposing it had to happen when you were forty-five, you had still thirteen years to write in.

“It shan’t happen. I won’t let it. I won’t let them beat me.” (Sinclair 359)

The passage clearly articulates the conflict between “you” and “hereditary destiny,” but it also models the conflict through its swings between second-, third-, and first-person narration, suggesting a fragmented, multiple Mary. The shift from “she” to “you” in a single sentence is particularly striking. I fail to detect a specific pattern in Sinclair’s choice of either “you” or “she,” though it seems not to be governed by Mary’s attitude towards heredity; the simple fact that the alternations occur, however, is enough to posit a formal correlative to the novel’s thematic exploration of female development against “the tug of the generations.”

This conflict has immediate consequences for Mary’s development and for the narration and structure of Sinclair’s *Bildungsroman*. Mary struggles to write poetry and philosophy despite her fear of the hereditary madness she expects to begin when she turns 45:

You had thought of yourself as a somewhat less powerful, but still independent and separate entity, a sacred, inviolable self, struggling against them for complete freedom and detachment. Crushed down, but always getting up and going on again; fighting a more and more successful battle for your own; beating them in the end. But it was not so. There were no independent, separate entities, no sacred, inviolable selves. They were one immense organism and you were part of it; you were nothing that they had not been

before you. It was no good struggling. You were caught in the net; you couldn't get out.

(333)

Sinclair embeds her protagonist's search for self-fulfillment into the more expansive plot of genetic continuation. Personal aspiration is consequently repeatedly frustrated by the idea if not the actual results of heredity: fearing the curse of hereditary madness, Mary puts off her poetic and philosophic work. As a result, the novel stretches long past the end of most *Bildungsromane*. Only in middle age and, significantly, after her mother's death, does she commit herself fully to her own growth. At this point, the narration begins to favour first-person interior monologue, though it does not fully replace its disorienting mixture of third and second person. In achieving the use of "I," Mary, like Ursula Brangwen, has managed partially to free her plot from the cycles of hereditary return. Ironically, the freedom manifests itself as a reversion to individual potentiality and sense of purpose; well into her forties, Mary appears to be "growing younger every minute" (414).

Weismannism produces its defamiliarization by making human character and the individual life-span satellites rather than kernels in a greater, transindividual life narrative: "the chain of life is in a real sense continuous, and that the 'bodies' which die are deciduous growths, which arise round about the real links. The bodies are but the torches which burn out, while the living flame has passed throughout the organic series unextinguished" (Geddes and Thomson 262). It is possible to read this as an extreme version of "reproductive futurism," an ideology that asserts "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable" any alternative to the genealogical imperative (Edelman 2). But the division of germ and soma offers a more positive interpretation, derived from the very feature that made Weismannism seem amorally dysteleological to its early critics. In an 1891 article, Henry Fairfield Osborn argues that if the Weismann idea triumphs, it will be in a sense a triumph of fatalism; for, according to it, while we may indefinitely improve the forces of our education and surroundings, and this civilizing nurture will improve the individuals of each generation, its actual

effects will be not cumulative as regards the race itself, but only as regards the environment of the race; each new generation must start *de novo*, receiving no increment of the moral and intellectual advance made during the lifetime of its predecessors. (363)

The picture of Weismannism painted by Osborn is less dire than he makes it seem. If every individual must learn from scratch, fostering good education and nurture is not only necessary but right; this is the basis, indeed, for the ideal of *Bildung*. We may recoil from the Weismannian view of our embodied selves as “deciduous growths” (Geddes & Thomson 262), and yet, as David Weir writes of Darwinism, “outright acceptance of mortality as an end in itself can be liberating” (xiii). Perhaps because Lamarckism and Neo-Darwinism tend (egregiously) to be polarized as left- and right-wing views, it bears pointing out Lamarckism is very much consistent with the sentence and sequence that modernists strive to disrupt, both formally and ethically. Osborn’s apparently progressive belief in “cumulative . . . advance” implies that desirable traits are founded on a long, even pre-determined genealogical history, that individuals are how they are because they were born that way. By contrast, Weismannism denies that my experiences affect the genetic particles I might transmit to offspring, so I am more or less free to do as I choose with my deciduous growth! In other words, by breaking the link between development and genealogical, the distinction between germ and soma attenuates or alters the interpersonal configurations (the oedipal and love triangles, the nuclear family) that have for so long given structure to Western narratives and thought more generally. For Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, for example, reproduction is patently not the beginning of death for the protagonists of the (fictitious) novel *Life’s Adventure*. What Woolf finds refreshing and politically potent in this novel is a “sight that has never been seen since the world began”: “Chloe likes Olivia and they share a laboratory,” from which Olivia leaves every night to “go home to her children” and husband (91). More radical than the most daring New Woman novel, *Life’s Adventure* grants its female protagonists a true affinity, uninfluenced by male interests, and allows them not to make the (often tragic) choice between self-fulfillment and family life, including reproduction. Olivia is,

without contradiction, a mother and a scientist working for the public good on a cure for “anaemia” (90). But it is not the all-or-nothing model that results in the successive disappearance of parents from the narrative of *The Rainbow*. I don’t claim that such effects depend on Weismannism or any other model of heredity, of course—simply that they are more congenial to the separation of germ and soma that Weismann theorized. To appreciate more fully the narrative complexities of modernist genic novels, however, we must move on to another paradigm, one that further complicates the counter-intuitive features of Weismannism.

### MENDELISM AND MODERNISM

“With the year 1900 a new era begins,” writes William Bateson of the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel’s theories (*Mendel* 7), anticipating Woolf’s more famous claim for December 1910. Indeed, in the second sentence of *The Modernist Novel* (2011), Stephen Kern hints that “the rediscovery of the work of Gregor Mendel in 1900,” which “revolutionized knowledge of hereditary transmission in showing that characteristics of organisms do not blend in offspring but are transmitted in discrete units according to specific laws,” bears some relation to modernism’s “absent protagonists, fragmented characters, ‘trivial’ events, [and] probabilistic causality” (Kern 2, 1). Like quantum mechanics, which views energy as discrete packets (quanta) rather than as a continuous stream, Mendelism sees heredity as the transmission of discrete atoms (genes). Also like quantum mechanics, it assigns a central role to chance.

The random nature of genetic transmission undermined notions of progress, including the progressivist and teleological appropriations of Darwinism that flourished in the late nineteenth century. In addition, Mendelism assumes that the origin of evolutionary novelty is the random and spontaneous emergence of new genetic characters. The origin of new species is thus a process not of gradual adaptation and amelioration but of “mutation” (de Vries ix). More disturbing still, as Hugo de Vries observes,<sup>14</sup> mutational origin of new traits, though it can give natural selection some useful new traits on which to work, can also produce change *despite*

natural selection: “the mutation theory gives a perfectly simple explanation of the existence of such characters [“of doubtful value”]; for useless, but not dangerous, mutations must appear as often as useful ones, and have almost as much likelihood as these of persisting” (65).

The weirdest implication of Mendelism was its mosaic model of inheritance, explained with enviable clarity in Simon Mawer’s fascinating novel *Mendel’s Dwarf* (1997). Mendel discovered

that each inherited character is determined by individual, distinct particles carried by the egg and by the pollen. That, for each simple inherited character, every offspring gains one such particle from its father and one from its mother. That the particles remain distinct and identifiable even though contrasting ones might temporarily come together in an individual. That you can follow the movement of these particles down through generations and that they are passed onto the offspring just as they were gained from the parents. That pure luck determines which of two differing characters is passed on. (94)

What’s more, each genetic particle is transmitted independently from the others. Sexual reproduction thus shuffles genes like cards, producing different combinations without affecting the integrity of individual genes. Mendelism therefore retains Weismann’s separation of germ and soma but complicates the model by fragmenting the germ-line into thousands of independent germ-lines, each on its own genealogical trajectory. In 1916, Jacques Loeb complained that “the difficulties” in the study of heredity

have been rather increased than diminished by the discovery of Mendelian heredity, according to which each character is transmitted independently of any other character. Since the number of Mendelian characters in each organism is large, the possibility must be faced that the organism is merely a mosaic of independent hereditary characters. If this be the case the question arises: What moulds these independent characters into a harmonious whole? (qtd. in Sapp 317)

To this question Reginald Punnett answers baldly that once all unit-characters are known, one “may proceed to build up synthetically, character by character, the plant or animal” (78). The notion of the individual as the synthetic product of discrete unit-characters follows from the Mendelian view of “heredity . . . as a method of analysis”—analysis here meaning the dissociation of a whole into its parts; thus, Punnett asserts,

the individual is an aggregate of unit-characters, and individuality is the expression of a particular aggregation of such characters . . . . [T]he factors on which these characters are based behave as independent entities during the hereditary process, and heredity in consequence we may regard as a method of analysis, enabling us to judge of the number and condition of the unit-characters which go to make up the individual. (74–75)

Punnett, of course, is speaking here as a geneticist; like the speaker of Hardy’s “Heredity” the individual itself is not his focus. Such reductionism has its uses, but I doubt that Punnett in his daily life thought of himself or anyone else as “an aggregate of unit-characters.” Writing in 1922, J. P. Lotsy issues a reminder that there is always also the perspective of the organism: “an organism is not a mere aggregate of a limited number of mutually independent living particles, it is an entity and life is a property of the whole . . . . not of separate genes” (394). Lotsy echoes Weismann when he insists on “the fundamental difference between the point of view of the gene-conception . . . and the physico-chemical conception” of the developing individual (395). This is not to say that the Mendelian view had no effect on our view of the individual. One of the first implications to emerge from Mendelism was that the insidious notion of genetic purity, formerly applied to individuals or races, could only apply to “a *single* character,” which almost inevitably coexists in the organism with numerous other “impure” characters (Yule 223). As early as 1902, G. Udny Yule insists that Mendelism “is a law applying to aggregates and predicates nothing concerning the individual” (227). Nearly forty years later, E. M. Forster would invoke “the civilizing figure of Mendel” in order to debunk the Nazi’s “ridiculous doctrine of Race Purity” (*Two Cheers* 19, 18).

Still, because inheritance has historically and continues intuitively to transmit aspects if not the whole of a personality, the Mendelian decomposition of the germ-line into a mosaic of independent particles is profoundly estranging and thus, for a certain type of writer, rife for literary exploitation. Mendelism complicates my two-plot model of the genic novel, which boasts a human (somatic) plot and a genetic (germ-line) plot. Mendelism would, in theory, divide the latter plot into innumerable genetic plots, one for each hereditary trait specified by the novel (yet few novels consider more than one or two such genetic trajectories, so the difference between Weismannism and Mendelism is usually negligible).

A loosely Mendelian logic accentuates the tragedy of Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Its protagonist Clare Kendry strives to model the power of self-determination over biological and cultural inheritance. Passing for white, Clare marries rich and achieves wealth and social status unreachable to non-whites in turn-of-the-century America. But then Clare's *Bildung* is checked by the fear of a genetic return of the repressed. She already has a daughter, Margery, who is as light-skinned as she is, but she fears the possibility that the next child would express the genes of its black grandfather: "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be black. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again" (25). The deception that gives Clare the freedom to determine her own life also prevents her from living it, because her desire includes having a son she dare not have lest the genes tell on her. Heredity here is not, I would argue, Larsen's way to punish Clare for denying her true identity (the novel dismisses such notions); instead, Larsen allows reproduction to assert its dialogic function in the *Bildung* plot, exposing the impossibility of being without denying the desirability of becoming a fully self-determined person. As Clare understands inheritance, blackness and whiteness are independent traits that can spontaneously reappear intact (in the same way that the child of two brown-eyed parents can have its grandmother's blue eyes). Of course, skin colour is *not* a discrete Mendelian trait and does not manifest in the all-or-nothing manner imagined by Clare; the result of complex interactions between many genes, it varies

continuously between and within so-called racial groups (Strum). In any case, it is the general logic of Mendelian inheritance rather than a rigorous application of the science that makes Clare's life so inwardly conflicted and her developmental plot so self-divided.

The atomistic logic of Mendelism can also quite literally fracture the individual. While in the earlier novels of a writer like Zola, characters suffer the curse of both their lineages, in modernist novels characters can be fractions of actual and hypothetical parentage. Elizabeth Bowen hints at such a possibility in *The Last September* (1929). When Mr. Montgomery nostalgically imagines having married Lois's mother, Lois responds enthusiastically, prompting him to point out that had he done so "you wouldn't be here." Lois's reply is strangely profound: "Oh, but half of me would be. And I daresay . . . the other half of me would have been much nicer" (88). To Montgomery, this response simply befits a silly girl, but Mendelism offers the grounds for imagining "me" with the same mother but a different father: in Mendelian inheritance, the mother's and father's genes combine but do not blend in the offspring. Bowen does not pursue this line further; nor does the genetic logic appear to have formal correlatives in the narrative. But Lois's brief fantasy of a better, half-counterfactual self does shed some light on the torqued plots of E. M. Forster's novels, particularly *The Longest Journey* (1907). Dying while saving his maternal half-brother Stephen from a train, Ricky Elliot enables the "much nicer" half of himself to survive in Stephen's child (who inherits the name of the brothers' mother) while ending his hated paternal line (this severance is symbolized by the train cutting off Ricky's clubfoot, a hereditary curse of the Elliot line). Forster's other novels frequently involve such divisions of reproductive and developmental labour, particularly between siblings. The messy plot of *Howards End* (1910), once dismissed as mere sloppiness but since reclaimed for modernist and queer aesthetics, is equivalent (if not equal to) the enviable life achieved by Olivia in Woolf's rendering of *Life's Adventure*. Where one would expect one female protagonist to fulfill her destiny in both marriage and procreation, Forster allocates each end to each sister: Margaret marries but wants no children, while unmarried Helen has a child. With the depersonalisation



and atomisation of heredity that culminates in Mendelism, characters can choose not to submit to the genealogical imperative and yet can still have “their” genes transmitted to the next generation through their siblings. In other words, an individual can “contribute” to genetic continuity without ever engaging in reproductive sex. By implicating characters other than the *Bildungsheld*, genic novels can significantly deform the *Bildung* plot without departing significantly from the genre’s concerns with development. In *The Longest Journey*, the narrative takes significant detours from the central plot of individual development, swinging several decades and a generation back to the courtship of Ricky’s parents in Chapter 29 and finally shifting narrative attention to the niece who survives him and carries on his genetic legacy. This is not to deny Ricky the fulfillment of artistic and development, however: in the end, his book of stories is a success.<sup>15</sup>

By separating the developing body from the germ-line, and by dissociating this germ-line into innumerable gene-lines, Mendelism enables even more radical disaggregations of the human essence. In *The Second Sex*, for example, Simone de Beauvoir recognizes that Mendelism renders previous hierarchies of sexual difference incoherent by eliminating the gender of hereditary molecules and the dissolving the dominance of paternal processes in fertilization and inheritance: “according to Mendel’s statistical laws,” she writes, “transmission of hereditary characteristics takes place equally from the father and the mother. What is important to see is that in this meeting neither gamete takes precedence over the other; they both sacrifice their individuality” (27). Not unlike Beauvoir, Huxley notes in a 1922 review that “the historical fact that sex-difference was recognised before the nature of sexual fusion was understood or even discovered” has inextricably confused our understanding; this history dictates that “the word sex etymologically implies a difference” that has no simple genetic or cellular basis (188). Huxley’s proof rests in a series of contemporary experiments on the genetics of sex determination, notably their discovery of Mendelian processes behind the production of intersex forms in several insects.

Huxley explains that intersexuality can result from the expression of mismatched genes. Normally, developmental rates throughout the body are coordinated, but when different varieties of moth are hybridized, this coordination is thrown off, resulting in “developmental intersexuality” (Huxley 197). To simplify greatly, all gypsy moths have both male and female genes, but one or the other develops faster and more dominantly than the other, producing a male or female moth; in hybrids, though, the two genes regulate developmental schedules at different rates, and the initially faster and dominant female gene, say, is later overtaken by the male. These intersexes are “sex-mosaics . . . *in time*. They start their development as normal females . . . and finish their career as males” (198). Though the result is typically individuals with mixed sexual traits, there are “cases of complete sex-reversal” (200).

The “new concept of developmental intersexuality” (Huxley 198) irresistibly invites a new look at one of modernism’s strangest *Bildungsroman*. This may well be what Jean-Jacques Mayoux means when he writes, in his 1930 review of *Orlando* (1928), that Woolf’s seemingly fantastical novel reflects “the very opinions of contemporary biology” (119). Woolf’s narrator does not linger much on mechanisms when, halfway through the novel, the title character awakens from a long sleep to find himself a woman, noting merely that the causes of the metamorphosis are for “biologists and psychologists [to] determine” (*Orlando* 139). And although following this lead would require an essay to itself, I’ll note that Orlando’s sex change, combined with Woolf’s well-known interest in moths and butterflies, makes it possible that the multiple developmental rates of Mendelian sex determination have something to do with *Orlando*’s multiple temporalities, the fact that “these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another,” are temporally independent of each other. As the narrator proclaims, “For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not . . . all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit?” (308).

Nor is sex-change the only biological oddity in *Orlando*. Orlando’s longevity is no less impressive, the result being that development extends so long as to absorb and displace

genealogy almost entirely. I say almost because Orlando does bear a son. In her reading of *Orlando*, Aimee Armande Wilson contrasts Orlando's "involuntarily conceived son" (91) with the later publication of her book of poetry. While the "child of her body" is produced by the fertility of the nineteenth century, and at the expense of a woman's artistic realization, Wilson argues that the "child of her mind" is "born at the right time" in the modern(ist) twentieth century (86, 91). But Orlando's longevity suggests that biological procreation and artistic creation might not, after all, be competing for her time. Living four hundred years ensures that she can do both. Such a mad utopianism can only be satirical; Woolf's point may be that the charmed life Olivia enjoys in *Life's Adventure*, combining family with career, is about as fantastical in the late 1920s as the notion of a man who becomes a woman and ages 36 years in four centuries.

## CONCLUSION

The oddities of modern genetics are difficult to harmonize with established ways of thinking and thus offered radically different answer to the *Bildung* plot to two of modernism's extreme figures: T. E. Hulme and Samuel Beckett. On the early and conservative end of modernism, Hulme countered the "spilt religion" of Romanticism (71) and its attendant aspirations of perfectibility with the assertion that "Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant" (70). For Hulme, Darwinism epitomizes the Romantic philosophy of individual and social progress because it

suppose[s] that each step in evolution has come gradually, by an accumulation of favourable small variations. If that were true, then it would be possible to conceive that man himself might . . . gradually change into something better. But the theory of evolution which is now gradually accepted is that of De Vries. His Mutation Theory gives quite a different account of the origin of species. It supposes that each new species came into existence in one big variation, as a kind of "sport", and, that once constituted, a species remains absolutely constant. There would then be no hope at all of progress for man. (169)

Hulme's obituary for Darwin is greatly exaggerated, but he rightly observes that Darwinism was hard-pressed (at least initially) to accommodate models of discontinuous inheritance such as De Vries' and Mendel's. In any case, Hulme's thesis has fascinating implications for the *Bildungsroman*; what, after all, does the genre look like if individual learning and experience are, from a genealogical perspective, for nought? In other words, what happens to the genre's constitutive analogy of development, historical emergence, and national spirit if the species is absolutely fixed? A Hulmean *Bildungsroman* might then have looked like Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* (1918), whose protagonist doesn't develop but rather alternates between two states; he also proclaims, apparently for his author, that "the ideal of perfect Success is an invention of the same sort of individual as the propagandist of Equal Rights and the Perfectibility of the Species" (333).

At the opposite historical and political end of modernism stands Beckett, whose fictions contrast with Hulme's aesthetics by tending towards irrepressible flux. In *Molloy*, the fact of having been born does not confer an obligation to perpetuate the genealogical cycle. Instead, Molloy inherits the means to live apparently forever, obviating the need to replace the self through reproduction. "Ah the old bitch," he curses his mother for his longevity, "a nice dose she gave me, she and her lousy unconquerable genes" (89). In *Malone Dies* the same fate represents a frustration of historical and genealogical progress. Macmann, we learn, is just

the son and grandson and greatgrandson of humans. But between him and those grave and sober men, first bearded, then moustached, there was this difference, that his semen had never done any harm to anyone. So his link with his species was through his ascendants only, who were all dead, in the fond hope they had perpetuated themselves. But the better late than never thanks to which true men, true links, can acknowledge the error of their ways and hasten on to the next, was beyond the power of Macmann, to whom it sometimes seemed that he could grovel and wallow in his mortality until the end of time and not have done. (273–74)

As usual for Beckett, nothing succeeds like failure. If Macmann fails to be a “true” man and link, so much the better; his failure serves to question the value of “true” manhood and the linking of reproductive futurity. Macmann’s parody of immortality is his equivocal reward for repudiating the myth that his children would right what he had mucked up. By breaking the genealogical sentence and sequence, he mirrors the formal strategies that make Beckett’s poetics of decrepitude and restlessness so distinctive. For both Macmann and Molloy, the refusal to forge a “link with his species” through descendants is equivalent to “wallow[ing] in his mortality until the end of time.” Similarly resisting the logic of linking in their syntax and plotting, Beckett’s novels reinvent the biographical plot (*Bildung* hardly applies here) by reclaiming for the individual life the powers of indefinite going on that it sacrificed when it became complex and individuated—in other words when it invented sexual reproduction.

For Weismann, death is a historical accident, a side effect of complex, multicellular life that divides its functions between the mortal soma and the potentially deathless germ-line. Rival biologists, notably Götze, saw death as a “primary necessity” of life, the inevitable result of reproductive exhaustion. This view, which goes back to Aristotle, would seem to endorse the stark opposition of development and procreation we find in *The Rainbow*. But Weismann argues that “death . . . has been secondarily acquired as an adaptation” and “that life is endowed with a fixed duration, not because it is contrary to its nature to be unlimited, but because the unlimited existence of individuals would be a luxury without any corresponding advantage” (24). If death is an adaptation, an “expedient” for ensuring “the maintenance of the species” because “worn-out individuals are not only valueless to the species, but . . . even harmful” (130, 135), it is perfectly logical that the conditions that make it adaptive can be altered, defusing the antagonism between life and reproduction.

In his view of our possible immortality, Weismann probably didn’t envision attenuated lives that “go on” endlessly, yet the crawling creatures of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *How It Is* suggest a return to the simplicity of primordial life while the self-replicating text of *The Unnamable*

approximates microbial multiplication-by-division. “Everything divides into itself,” observes Malone, one of Beckett’s characters who can’t seem to “get on with my demise” (206, 268). Similarly cursed, the Unnamable has tried modelling his life on the progressive course of evolution but reverts time and again to unicellular beginnings: “my good-will at certain moments is such, and my longing to have floundered however briefly, however feebly, in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans, that I, no, parenthesis unfinished. I’ll begin again” (366). In *How It Is* (1961), Beckett offers another version of this “loss of species” (17) resulting from the merger of the developmental and genealogical plots.<sup>16</sup> The narrator’s reduced biography (“my life last sate last version ill-said ill-heard ill-recaptured ill-murmured in the mud brief movements”) also encompasses the span of biological evolution: “my life natural order more or less” is also the “vast stretch of time from there that moment and following not all a selection natural order vast tracts of time” (1). In effect, the content of the development plot absorbs the mechanism of the genealogical plot: forfeiting generational continuity, the life story can recruit the iterations of “beginning again” more typical of generational turnover than of developmental progress (*Molloy* 372). What remains may not conform to the trajectory of classical *Bildung*. And yet it moves—not on and up, but on and on (and on). Beckett thus radically reinvents the biographical plot and supplies the narrative momentum that, as frustrated as it is, gives his depressing texts such implausible vigour.

Beckett’s novels are the *reductio ad absurdum* of the modernist *Bildungsroman*’s experiments with the two plots of development and genealogy. In another sense, though, his stylistic innovations anticipate the thematic explorations of cloning narratives.<sup>17</sup> By demonstrating to such extremes the ways in which genealogy constrains and yet gives meaning to individual life, Beckett’s fiction also parallels the struggles, especially stark in postcolonial and diasporic novels, to forge a future for their protagonists without denying the reality of biological as well as cultural roots. Salman Rushdie’s self-proclaimed debt to Beckett is well known and hardly surprising; but the fate of going on despite not being able to go on has a much wider field in contemporary

*Bildungsromane* concerned with identity, exclusion, and self-fashioning. There is a definite family resemblance between the hereditary hauntings in modernist novels such as *The Longest Journey*, *Mary Olivier*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the negotiations between individuality and history, nation, and tradition in post-War novels such as *The Tin Drum*, *Midnight's Children*, *Illywacker*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, and *The Heart of Redness*. All are genic novels: in one way or another, but always perversely, they deploy genealogy against the ideals of autonomy, self-determination, and creativity that animate the *Bildungsroman*. At the same time they reassert, by redefining or reinventing, what Lawrence calls “the tiny importance of the individual, within the great past” (*Rainbow* 304).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, studies by Donald Childs, Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche, William Greensdale, and Dana Seidler.

<sup>2</sup> The conflict between heredity and biographical genres enjoys more attention in nineteenth-century studies; see Christine Ferguson; Alexis Harley; Heike Hartung, Christine Lehleiter, and Anne-Julia Zwierlein. On *Bildung* and biology more generally, see Helmut Müller-Sievers.

<sup>3</sup> Because Dawkins is so often misread, partly through his own fault, I should specify that my claim for a gene-centered plot does not in any way suggest that genes are “little personified agents or homunculi with wills and motives of their own,” as Judith Roof puts it (74). Genes, like anything living, nonliving, or even abstract, can be narrative “actors” (“a unit equivalent to a noun phrase and individuated in such a way as to constitute an autonomous figure of the narrative world”) without being an agent (“a human or humanized being performing an action or act; a character who acts and influences the course of events”) (Prince 3, 4).

<sup>4</sup> Though often used to describe a property of language, Bakhtin’s term “dialogism” can also refer to the interaction of two or more chronotopes, the spatialization of time that “provide[s] the basis for distinguishing generic types” (*Dialogic* 250–51). “Within the limits of a single work,” writes Bakhtin, “we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them ...; it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others ... Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships.... The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogical*” (*Dialogic* 252).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence first tested this dynamic in *Sons and Lovers*, whose early chapters focus on Walter and Gertrude Morel (Gregory Castle calls this “the pre-history of *Bildung*” [105]), then briefly on eldest son William. Only when William dies does the narrative really begin to chart Paul’s development. Though a reader might begin reading *Sons and Lovers* as a family novel, the ending retrospectively reframes the early chapters as pertaining to Paul. The generic split produced by the focal shift from Brangwen line to *Bildung* would have been even more acute had Lawrence succeeded in his plan to publish *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* as a single novel.

<sup>6</sup> In *Philosophie zoologique* (1809), Jean-Baptiste Lamarck proposed that organisms develop according to the use and disuse of their organs, and that useful developments are then transmitted to offspring, resulting in progressive evolution. This model was the best scientific explanation for the facts of heredity until the last quarter of the century; Darwin himself relied on it. It was in the wake of Darwin's theory that heredity became a critical problem in biology. Mendel published his work in 1865, but they were effectively unknown until 1900. Weismann introduced his Neo-Darwinian model of the continuity of the germ-plasm in 1883. Mendelian and Neo-Darwinian conceptions of heredity initially seemed antithetical, but they came together in the Modern Evolutionary Synthesis of the 1920s to 1940s. The molecular revolution in genetics is marked by the description of the DNA double helix in 1953.

<sup>7</sup> Other theorists had already explained heredity as physical particles, including Darwin (pangenes), his cousin Francis Galton (stirps), and Hugo de Vries (unit-characters). Jane Oppenheimer writes that "atomicity, as elucidated by Dalton for chemistry, was implicit in the ideals of Mendel and Pasteur, and equally in the determinants postulated by Weismann" (161). Jan Sapp calls this view of heredity "the material link between generations" (315). The analogy between genetic transmission and viral contagion is thus fairly accurate; as Gal Gerson reports, contemporary critics of Weismann and Mendel worried that "the specialization that severed genetics' contact with social sensibilities was accompanied by a dissociation of present from past and future, both of which had now become inhabited by alien species" (103).

<sup>8</sup> Weismannism is the philosophical foundation for the current gene-centered view of evolution, popularly known through Dawkins' metaphor of the selfish gene. Indeed, Dawkins has stated that his views might be called "extreme Weismannism" (164).

<sup>9</sup> Early studies of the anti-Bildung narrative dynamics in *A Portrait* include Hugh Kenner's polemic in *The Kenyon Review*, Michael Levenson's fascinating essay on Stephen's diary, and Franco Moretti's epilogue to the second edition of *The Way of the World*. More recent studies by Jessica Berman, Tobias Boes, Gregory Castle, and Jed Esty have addressed *A Portrait's* *Bildung*-defying gaps, digressions, and rhythms in detail.

<sup>10</sup> The full sentence from which Temple quotes is, "We have just emphasised the view of Goette and other naturalists, that reproduction is the beginning of death; which is not inconsistent with the apparent paradox, that local death was the beginning of reproduction" (258). Despite the reference to Goette's (i.e. Götte's) thesis on biological death, which Weismann "must strongly oppose" (Weismann 119), Geddes and Thomson's description, particularly their reference to "local death," is clearly steeped in Weismannism. I identify the source of Joyce's allusion in "A Source for 'The Most Profound Sentence' in *A Portrait of the Artist*."

<sup>11</sup> Geddes and Thomson rightly specify that, "as Weismann insists, it is more correct to speak of 'the continuity of the germinal protoplasm' than the continuity of the germ-cells" (262). By this they mean simply that it is the genetic material within sex-cells that lives on, not the cells themselves.

<sup>12</sup> See Joseph Valente's excellent articles on Joyce's treatments of "Homosexual Panic" and "Irish Masculinity."

<sup>13</sup> In the 1891 edition of *Principes d'économie politique*, Charles Gide (uncle of André), applies Geddes and Thomson's central thesis to questions of population and, implicitly, social policy: "As the fertility of any species appears usually to vary in inverse ratio to the development of the individuals of the species, ... and further, as there appears to be *a physiological law which would seem to establish an antagonism between generative activity and cerebral activity*, we may hope that the fecundity of the human species is destined to slacken progressively in proportion to the intellectual and moral development of the individuals that compose it. (See Herbert Spencer's *Biology*, and *The Evolution of Sex*, by Professor Patrick Geddes.)" (Gide 323, my italics).



<sup>14</sup> Hugo de Vries, a Dutch botanist, anticipated many aspects of Mendelism before re-discovering Mendel's papers in 1900, along with two German biologists. Though his interpretations differ from Mendel's in the details, these details are not significant enough for me to differentiate between the Mendelism and de Vries' mutation theory. For a contemporary comparison of de Vries and Mendel, see W. J. Spillman.

<sup>15</sup> I give a fuller version of this argument in "Heredity, Kin Selection and the Fate of Characters in E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*."

<sup>16</sup> The Unnamable, instead of building progressively from "earliest protozoa to the very latest humans," continually cycles back to the beginning; the narrator of *How It Is*, futilely "waiting for things to improve," experiences "the fragility of euphoria among the different orders of the animal kingdom beginning with the sponges" (27).

<sup>17</sup> Beckett's disarticulated, reiterative narration is therefore a stylistic manifestation of the biographical chronotope's absorption of the genealogical chronotope. In cloning narratives, the absorption occurs instead at the level of content, the protagonist's life being extended indefinitely at the expense (or in lieu) of reproduction; see Fay Weldon's *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), Martha Nussbaum's "Little C" (1998), Eva Hoffman's *The Secret* (2002), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and Duncan Jones's film *Moon* (2009).

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# **The New Old Woman of the 1930s: Aging and Women's History in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the decade following the victory of the Franchise Act of 1928, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, and Winifred Holtby all wrote novels representing older female protagonists as active, vital, critical thinkers. Working against the backdrop of the over-determined meanings of youth and age created by both the progressive discourses of the suffrage movement and the backlash against them, these authors represent older heroines positioned in alliance with younger women. The novels respond to a cultural hostility towards older women and spinsters, but they also use older protagonists to represent an element of women's history, positioning them as critical sifters of the traditions of the past who have something essential to contribute to the future of the women's movement.

## **KEYWORDS**

British Modernism, Aging, Suffrage Movement, Women's History, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Winifred Holtby

Whatever the ages of the actual women who participated in the suffrage campaign and related feminist movements of the modernist era, the historically new “New Woman” was generally not imagined as an old woman. Generational conflict had been an element of the suffrage movement in England as early as the 1890s (Caine 132). The much-discussed debate concerning the “Revolt of the Daughters” in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in 1894 cast the new possibilities for women in terms of the rebellion of the young, whom their attackers imagined as selfish (Crackenthorpe 23-31). This generational imaginary lasted well into the twentieth century. After 1928, when British women were granted the vote on the same terms as men, one understandable habit of mind was to focus on the future of the young women who would enjoy new freedoms and opportunities. But this habit had its negative side; Margaret Morgonroth Gullette has written about the backlash against older women in early twentieth-century British and American culture pointing out that a combination of factors, including a dropping birth rate and “the feminist idealization of the advanced young woman of the era,” contributed to a certain hostility towards the postmaternal woman (Gullette 222). The postmaternal woman was imagined as declining, leisured, and—via birth control—as having given up on the duties of mothering too early. Gullette claims that feminists unwittingly participated in this narrative:

As moderns and self-identified “daughters,” writers of all ages who envisioned young (often college-going) readers as their ideal audience represented the young as a progressive category; they locked themselves into contrasting the not-young of the same class as inhibited and unchangeable. (Gullette 236)

The risk of dismissing older women and their experience is woven into the model of temporality imagined by the suffrage movement as a progressive discourse. As Rita Felski has documented, a connection between gender and narratives of progress was forged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the suffrage movement claimed gender equality as the vital, even inevitable next step in the forward march of history (145-55). Many women in Virginia Woolf’s circle felt the claims of the women’s movement were profoundly generational;

as Hermione Lee notes, because Woolf's mother opposed the idea of women voting, Woolf experienced campaigning for women's rights as a part of killing "The Angel in the House," and thereby taking distance from the domineering, elderly face of her Victorian parents (Lee 85; 279-80).<sup>1</sup> Karen Chase argues that later Victorian society tended to identify with the aging Queen Victoria, coming to imagine itself as elderly in its endurance and authority: "the nineteenth century became 'Victorian' when it became old, that is, when it described its attributes from the position of age" (Chase 157). In setting oneself against such traditional cultural authorities, it was easy to imagine that it was the elderly themselves that had to be rejected. That doesn't mean, of course, that the young women who were to inherit new options and possibilities weren't an even greater source of cultural anxiety. Billie Melman offers an overview of the discussion of the younger woman in the first decade of the interwar period as an object of fantasy and suspicion. Melman notes that younger women were a hot topic in the 1920s, when millions of women between 21 and 30 did not yet have the vote but might soon get it; the Equal Franchise Bill of 1928 was referred to as the "Flapper Vote" (Melman 1).

In the years after the Equal Franchise Bill, working against the backdrop of these over-determined meanings of youth and age, several important women writers turned to narratives of old age and more specifically to the representation of older heroines positioned in alliance with younger women. Cynthia Port has written about the increased obsession with female youth in the period as a way of distracting women from professionalization and maturation; she argues that in the Britain of the 1920s and 30s, "the anxieties about aging projected by early twentieth-century culture served to deflect women's attention from the personal and professional development that began to seem within reach after World War I" (Port 139). This pressure to appear young naturally pitted younger and older women against each other. Conversely, positioning older and younger women as co-conspirators allowed female authors to resist the market value of female youth and establish the possibility that the next generation could draw on the continuity of maturation and experience. In focusing on such a continuity, the authors

examined here not only responded to the cultural hostility towards older women and spinsters, but also used older characters as components of their representations of women's history. Diana Wallace notes the popularity of the genre of women's histories (written by women, finally) after the Franchise Act: "It was a moment that seemed to call for a kind of stock-taking, looking back at the past in order to measure the distance come, and to assess the distance still to travel" (220). I argue that a similar stock-taking is performed by several British novels of the 1930s about aging women: Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*, Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, and Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*. In writing about the progress of women and the historical configurations under which women had operated and did operate, a glance towards the past was an important portion of clarifying what had been and might be. Looking forward was intertwined with a taking account of what had been lost or repressed in the past. Writing about older women in the present could act as a way of assessing the legacy of the strict gender norms of the Victorian period, but positioning these norms in relationship with younger protagonists also served as a way of demonstrating that the new attitudes and aspirations of young women were grounded in a tradition and could claim a history of their own. Situating younger characters as the beneficiaries of inter-generational alliances with older women allowed some of this representation of the autonomy of spinsters to be extended forward into the next generation.

Both younger women and older women may, in different senses, be cast as representatively "modern:" the younger woman may embody new possibilities for opportunity, but the older woman may embody the awareness of a long historical past that is also so much a part of being modern and modernist. And so in each of the three novels, *South Riding*, *The Years*, and *All Passion Spent*, older women appear as a key element of the progressive movement, with something specific and specifically modern to add to the march of women's history. The older women do not serve an elegiac function; they are not represented merely as cautionary tales about the evils of past oppressions.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the older female characters are active participants in contemporary social projects. The possibilities that were repressed or scorned in the past have, in

these novels, also accumulated and stored up—the frustrations of these older characters' lives have produced, in silence and under the radar, a much-needed perspective. Active and vital older characters can negotiate, sift, and even re-inherit their past. While the progress of women may harbor hopes for the young, it occurs in a decisively old modern age which is only beginning to awaken from a long past of patriarchy—and older female characters prove a valuable site for the re-imagining of the hinge between the past and the future.

### **SACKVILLE-WEST, INHERITANCE AND THE INTERGENERATIONAL NOVEL OF AWAKENING**

Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent* (1931) fits into what feminist scholars have called the *Altersroman* (Westervelt 21) or *Reifungsroman* (novel of maturity) (Waxman 16-21)—a novel of development focused on an older woman. But the novel might also be seen as an important variant of what has been called the “novel of awakening.” As Susan Rosowski describes this modernist-era variant of the *Bildungsroman* (whose most famous examples include Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Chopin's *The Awakening*), the female protagonist of the novel of awakening becomes aware not of possibilities but of socially-imposed limitations; often the novel focuses on a potential female artist who is destroyed by this new awareness (Rosowski 49-68). *All Passion Spent* varies this pattern, however, by having Lady Slane awaken to the limitations that kept her from being an artist, but only once she has also arrived at an advanced age. She is therefore able to pass on her new understanding by supporting a younger woman who plans to be an artist, and who does have the opportunity to pursue this goal. The awakening—now successful—simultaneously appears as individual and historical because it operates inter-generationally.

Published when Vita Sackville-West had begun to be influenced by Woolf,<sup>3</sup> *All Passion Spent* tells the story of the octogenarian aristocrat Lady Slane, who finds a brief second life after the death of her husband. The very public life of Lord Slane (he had been viceroy of India) has forced Lady Slane to live a life of conformity and falsehood. When her husband dies, her

children rush in to manage the situation on the assumption that, having been ruled by her husband for so long, Lady Slane has no preferences of her own. During the initial mourning period, however, Lady Slane, as the widow, must be consulted on everything: "Nobody could have foreseen that Father, so dominant always, would by the mere act of dying turn Mother into the most prominent figure" (52). The plot of the novel is essentially a protraction of this brief period of authority, as Lady Slane asserts that she does in fact have preferences and retires to a country house, barring anyone young from visiting. Bothered by the restlessness of youth, she insists that she wants "no one about [her] except those who are nearer to their death than their birth" (68).

Sackville-West might be accused of romanticizing old age in the novel by projecting a fantasy of serene wisdom onto her elderly characters. Lady Slane easily lays aside not only all selfish striving, but also all anxiety. Lady Slane and her contemporaries, Mr. Bucktrout and Mr. Gosheron, are all equally unconventional and unhurried, the nearness of death eliminating for them all forms of small-mindedness, competition, and worry, even on behalf of other people.<sup>4</sup> But it is important to note that the force from which Lady Slane serenely withdraws does not seem to be youth but rather the striving of the middle of life. The novel as a whole stresses that the potentiality and dreams of youth are not so problematic as the prudent and calculated trundling of everyday middle age. Lady Slane values the ambitions of her youth, which she had to set aside in order to be married—specifically, that she wanted to be a painter but could not be one while also being the wife of a Viceroy. She revisits those dreams now and forms a kind of imaginative link between her old and young selves. Youth and old age conspire in this novel, for they value the same things:

The coldness with which she was now able to estimate [her marriage] frightened her a little, yet it took her back in some curious way to the days when she had plotted to elude her parents and consecrate herself to an existence [as an artist] which, although conventionally reprehensible, should, essentially, be dedicated to the most severe and difficult integrity.

*Then*, she had been face to face with life; and that had seemed a reason for a necessity for the clearest thinking; *now*, she was face to face with death, and that again seemed a reason for the truest possible estimate of values, without evasion. The middle period alone had been confused. (166-67)

This confusion is recreated in the satirized conventionality of Lady Slane's adult children, who concern themselves primarily with the small politics of who shall inherit her jewels.

The alliance between youth and old age is solidified by the ending of the novel, where Lady Slane meets with her great-granddaughter, Deborah. Deborah is also Lady Slane's name, though her position as Lord Slane's wife has so determined her she feels only that it "once was" her name (280). Young Deborah expresses her desire to be a musician, despite the conventional expectation that she marry; she appears to Lady Slane as an "other self" and the two women are united in a near-visionary passage, though Deborah, in her "young egoism" does not note the significance of what is happening to her great-grandmother (282). Young Deborah receives support from the encounter and Lady Slane dies nearly immediately. The conspiratorial alliance between youth and old age is emphasized, perhaps beyond the point of subtlety, by the two women's matched names. Middle age, burdened with the duties of running the world, is thoroughly conventional in *All Passion Spent*, which also means patriarchal. But youth and old age together have an outside perspective in that they aren't given to competition and material gain, and this perspective also allows women to pursue their desires and interests. By contrast, Lady Slane's oldest son Herbert, the most pragmatic and authoritative of her children, never permits his wife to finish a sentence.

Sackville-West positions Lady Slane's subjectivity as an historical point of accumulation, a private place where the materials of the past are stored. The one child of Lady Slane's who seems to understand her, Edith, describes her as a type of storehouse: "It now dawned upon Edith that her mother might have lived a full private life, all these years, behind the shelter of her affectionate watchfulness. How much had she observed? noted? criticised? stored up?" (69).



Somewhat problematically, it is this cache of past which might be said to be “spent” in the final visionary passage, wherein Lady Slane’s history is exhausted in giving itself over to a young woman with the same name who might live the life she wishes she had lived. Having passed on her historicity to a younger woman, she can perish peacefully. Her subjectivity is thereby imagined as a resource for the next generation rather than an autonomous experience of the latter part of her life.

Positioning Lady Slane as a storehouse of the past, however, allows Sackville-West to raise the issue of inheritance, of the public and private accumulations of what has been received. In Sackville-West’s works, inheritance is a pervasive theme, and critics and biographers have established the roots of her strained relationship to inheritance in her reaction to the loss of Knole, the family estate which, as a woman, she was barred from inheriting. She was also heavily invested in a pastoral treatment of the landscape and of traditional agricultural landholding, which she represented with a nostalgic and elitist attitude.<sup>5</sup> Sackville-West’s most elaborate pastoral work is *The Land* (1927), but her struggle with the theme of inheritance is most prominently on display in the novella *The Heir* (1922), a fantasy of re-inheritance that tells the story of a man who inherits and eventually comes to appreciate a country house. But as Louise De Salvo notes, in *All Passion Spent* Sackville-West engages with inheritance from an altered political angle (De Salvo 208). One of the central reasons for this shift is that in *All Passion Spent*, the political agenda is set by gender rather than by class; this change of focus might be said to have modernized Sackville-West’s aesthetic priorities.<sup>6</sup> The impediments to Sackville-West’s own inheritance were aristocratic and archaic; she was barred from inheriting Knole in 1928 by a will written in the Elizabethan period, limiting the estate to male heirs. But material inheritance had been a much more recent concern for suffrage-era feminism; the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 had been called a “Magna Carta for Women” because it terminated the law that absorbed women’s property and inheritance into their husbands’ legal personhood and control (Frank 111). Both before and after the passing of that Act, women in Britain could and did

inherit property. But one of the effects of the general assumption that women would eventually be provided for by their husbands (who, before 1882, would also gain legal control of their property) was that daughters were rarely left a substantial inheritance—many were left only an annuity until marriage (Frank 109). Widows, however, often inherited at least some property when their husbands died, and frequently continued to manage and expand upon it (Green 221). As a result, women who inherited property were rarely very young. When Lady Slane in *All Passion Spent* inherits her husband's estate in her eighties, she is not an atypical heir, and her belated inheritance is therefore more representative of the general relationship many women had to property than it might seem.

Because Sackville-West reconsiders inheritance from a gendered angle in *All Passion Spent*, she also associates it clearly with patriarchy, allowing her sense of “inheritance” to transcend the material and begin to encompass the cultural weight of habit and tradition. If *The Heir* is a fantasy wherein the inheritance of a country estate is restored, inheritance is positioned in *All Passion Spent* as a force to be resisted. Inheritances are figured in the text as a thing left to women by men, and therefore as a form of male control. Young Deborah is only able to break off her marriage engagement and pursue an artistic career because she is no longer an heiress (284-5). Material inheritance is villainized; in one passage, Lady Slane even justifies her donation through a critique of private property in general (276). An old admirer of Lady Slane's, Mr. FitzGeorge, leaves her his invaluable fortune of collectibles, but she donates the artifacts to a museum and the money to hospitals, noting with joy how much the relinquishing of a fortune will annoy her pragmatic children (259). Having shucked off the legacy of conventional patriarchy, Lady Slane must logically also resist the wealth that is offered by a male admirer. FitzGeorge may recognize that Lady Slane's husband has repressed her (he says “killed her”—221), but he fails to recognize that his own gift will also be repressive, leaving the elderly woman with a fabulous collection to manage. This episode thereby critiques the patriarchal elevation of women as idols, even when performed by a seemingly sensitive man. Material inheritance,

celebrated for its preservation of aristocratic privilege in *The Heir*, has now become an emblem of patriarchy. With this twinned rejection of wealth and male control, Sackville-West finds a position of resistance to associate with old age—with a subjectivity that has had time to sift its inheritance, and to see that one can be buried beneath it.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE ALLIANCES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937) also engages with a complex overlapping of individual aging and social inheritance. Like *All Passion Spent*, the novel's final section centers on a form of alliance between an older and a younger woman, although Woolf's version of this alliance is muted and subtly drawn, built out of meaningful near-misses between two characters rather than out of perfect moments of harmony. Woolf uses this complex alliance to represent the evolution of a feminist historical perspective in dialogue with the unconscious mind.

The essays Woolf wrote in the 1930s articulate a complex engagement with the unconscious as a historical force. Woolf's concern with time has often been simplified down to her interest in the "moment" as something that stops time in an image of unity—the epiphany that reveals that "behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern" (*Moments* 81). The over-emphasis on the revelatory "moment" is often linked to the image of Woolf as a nostalgic elitist who retreated from political engagement. But Woolf's approaches to time are plural and complex. She took an interest in several different scales of time throughout her career, dwelling on geological time and prehistory, the evolution of genres, and the accumulation of the past in the unconscious and in language. Woolf explains a surprising range of phenomena with reference to the distant past; most famously, her feelings of shame and guilt when she is fondled by her half-brother are explained thusly: "It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past" (*Moments* 77). In the first version of *The Years*, the abandoned essay-novel *The Pargiters*, Woolf uses similar phrasing (but on

a different time-scale) to explain Kitty Malone's desire to be found attractive: "Kitty's body had been trained to send out and receive a multitude of impressions about her body and other people's bodies for generations" (*Pargiters* 129). What these formulations suggest is not the persistence of an atemporal, primordial force in the self, but rather a self that is formed out of complex set of historical processes on a variety of scales. In these passages Woolf describes the self as a sophisticated layering of historical inheritances, some of which may go back to the beginning of human life in cities, some to a particular patriarchal tradition. The Woolfian self is an accretion of many sources, and even the most ancient of them are still "historical," admitting of process and change.

Woolf's representations of historical process often involve the unconscious mind, not only in the sense that the above passages suggest aspects of selfhood may be unconsciously inherited, but also in her situation of the unconscious itself as a historically developing force. Woolf sees a form of historical life precisely in that sphere where Freud claimed there is no time whatsoever. Accordingly, she also suggests that we might become more open to the unconscious as we grow older. The motion towards an openness to the unconscious is adumbrated on both an individual and a generational time scale. In "The Leaning Tower" she expresses the hope that the next generation of writers, "with help from Dr. Freud . . . may inherit . . . a whole state of mind, a mind no longer evasive, crippled, divided" (*CE II* 178).<sup>7</sup> In *Orlando*, engaging with Vita Sackville-West's personal history and inheritance alongside England's, Woolf depicts a subjectivity that becomes more plural as it ages, so that Orlando can eventually lie against the oak tree and sink into the "dark pool of the mind," which is clearer by night, and survey the past (312). Woolf's hope for an increasing openness to the unconscious has an important parallel in the "guess" she makes in *Three Guineas*:

Ease and freedom, the power to change and the power to grow, can only be preserved by obscurity . . . if we wish to help the human mind to create, and to prevent it from scoring the same rut repeatedly, we must do what we can to shroud it in darkness. (*TG* 114)

Growth, according to this formulation, only happens in darkness; the patriarchal state, by contrast, pressures everyone towards mainstream acceptability. The necessity of the “Outsider’s Society” proposed in *Three Guineas* is connected to growth and development: one of the problems with the aggressive mainstream is that it stifles growth with its expectations. The plural and adventurous life of the mind occurs at the margins, where the unconscious can be experienced and neighbored.

*The Years* represents the need for inter-generational alliance between women in its final “Present Day” chapter, but it describes that alliance as a tenuous harmony set in the context of the development of the life of the unconscious. The difficulty of passing on an unconscious historical accumulation are figured in the inarticulacy of the novel’s elderly protagonist, Eleanor, while the fears about her contemporaries Woolf expressed in *Three Guineas* are on display in the cynicism and unhappiness of Eleanor’s niece, Peggy. Continuity and alliance are never simple things for Woolf, and the inter-generational alliances in *The Years* are manufactured more out of echoes and near-misses than out of moments of complete union. As a result, *The Years*, with its ambiguous and cacophonous final chapter, has not always been read as an optimistic text.<sup>8</sup> But the novel represents a historical movement from deception to honesty. In the opening chapter, the Pargiters’ Victorian family life is dominated by an atmosphere of falsehood: Martin later reflects that it is no surprise their childhood home will not sell, for it is polluted by the fact that they all lived “boxed up together, telling lies” (163). The novel opens with a group of women stuck inside, warning each other not to be caught looking out the window at a gentleman lest they be thought lustful, while Rose is meanwhile accosted by a man who exposes himself to her on the street. That Rose knows not to tell her father about her victimization insinuates a desire for control in the father, much like what Woolf describes in *Three Guineas* as “infantile fixation” (130). The patriarchal authority associated with Abel’s position and age casts a shadow of falsehood over the house; sexual matters can never be discussed by any of the children, but Abel

is himself having an affair. This false maturity is at the heart of Woolf's critique of Victorian society in the novel: the reverence for age in patriarchal forms distorts the ability to tell the truth.

This distortion does not entirely end as time passes in the novel, but it gradually loosens. Eleanor grows older and becomes a vital spinster, a reflective and active member of society. When she is around thirty, she reflects that it is others who look to her "settled, elderly, as if their minds were already made up. For some reason she always felt that she was the youngest person in an omnibus" (73-4). When Eleanor meets a gay man, Nicholas, in 1917, she reacts thusly: "For a second a sharp shiver of repugnance passed over Eleanor's skin as if a knife had sliced it. Then she realized that it touched nothing of importance. The sharp shiver passed. Underneath was—what? She looked at Nicholas" (217). In this passage we see a developing willingness to question her biases, figured as a willingness to look "underneath" the surface and towards her unconscious inheritances. Eleanor then begins a series of conversations with Nicholas about whether humans really are improving and how they can make progress if they do not know themselves. Nicholas claims that the soul wants to grow, historically: "It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations?" (216). While Eleanor's friendship with Nicholas is itself one of these new combinations, the two of them fall into a sort of conversational dead-end, repeating the same exchange about growth for years without making progress. As in the passage from *Three Guineas* quoted above, they are "scoring the same rut repeatedly," groping for the obscurity that would allow new insight.

The final section of the novel represents a strained and uncertain connection between Eleanor and her niece Peggy, who seem to be continually missing the chance to connect. When Eleanor sees Peggy reading a book, she enthusiastically proclaims Peggy's life a miracle, but Peggy has in fact only grabbed a book to hide her loneliness (280). While much of the narrative energy has shifted to the next generation, neither Peggy nor her brother North seem particularly happy. The younger characters, like the women described in *Three Guineas*, have inherited

opportunities but also a cynicism and coldness; Peggy is at risk of becoming a “cripple in a cave,” as Woolf describes the over-professionalized person (*TG* 72).

Peggy and Eleanor are nonetheless aligned by the fact that each of them has an optimistic moment of vision that neither is able to communicate. Peggy, having expressed considerable cynicism about civilization in general, then sees suddenly “not a place, but a state of being, in which there was real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole and free. But how could she say it?” (285). She stumbles through trying to describe it and only ends up insulting her brother instead, losing her vision in her habitual cynicism. The fact that she makes her vision into an attack on North suggests a failure of maturity, in terms of Woolf’s own belief in the importance of impersonality: “She had got it wrong. She had meant to say something impersonal, but now she was being personal” (286). Eleanor, by contrast, has two optimistic visions. The first is a dream. In the final version of *The Years*, Eleanor simply forgets this dream, though she feels wonderful when she wakes up, feeling that “they were all young, with the future before them” (280).<sup>9</sup> In the second vision, placed at the very ending of the novel, Eleanor sees a man and a woman getting into a taxicab, and says twice “there!” as if something has been resolved or finally seen (318). This final moment, which many have found perplexing and unsatisfactory (Middleton 169), has also been connected by several critics to Woolf’s use of the image of a man and a woman in a taxicab in *A Room of One’s Own* (*AROO* 96-98).<sup>10</sup> Given that *The Years* opens with a scene in which Eleanor warns her sisters not to be caught looking at a gentleman calling across the road, the vision does suggest a movement into a future of sexual satisfaction and less artificial division between men and women. Eleanor’s visions are just as private and inarticulate as Peggy’s; the first is forgotten, while the second is hardly communicated at all. This connection adumbrates a fuller alliance between the two women. While the dangerous corrosiveness of modern professional life may be making Peggy cynical, this connection between Peggy and her aunt suggests she may yet envision a life that combines the freedom of new possibilities with the absence of manipulative pressure her aunt experienced

growing up in the Victorian age. No final statement is made concerning whether Peggy will find a more optimistic approach to her vision, but the alliance between the women is reinforced by these visions that simultaneously redirect them towards the silence of what is unconscious and cannot be fully stated.

Perhaps the richest suggestion of what Woolf wants out of this alliance occurs in an earlier moment. When Eleanor expresses a wish to travel, Peggy responds by abruptly asking, "Was it that you were suppressed when you were young?" (245). An image of Eleanor's father flashes through Peggy's mind, reminding the reader that Eleanor did lose much of her life to caring for her father. But Eleanor responds: "Suppressed? . . . She so seldom thought of herself that she was surprised" (245). Eleanor goes on to say that though she understands what Peggy means, she does not want her past, she wants the present (245-6). While Eleanor understands the statement, she so rarely thinks of herself that she struggles to see its application. This is a complex interaction, for Woolf is positioned on both sides of it; she repudiates the patriarchal control that has limited Eleanor's options, but she also wrote widely about how maturity involved thinking less about oneself, not remaining trapped in one's own side: "as people mature, they cease to believe in sides" (*AROO* 106). Eleanor has not so much forgiven her past as barely bothered to think of it as limiting, despite the fact that Woolf certainly believes it to have been. We might see the perspective Woolf herself would advocate as combining these two women's positions: Eleanor wants to travel out of curiosity and concern for the world, not out of personal rebellion or retribution, and yet Peggy's modern political consciousness of the way one's life can be truncated by patriarchy is also essential. A fusion of these perspectives, here associated with youth and age, would combine a critical political consciousness with a generous-minded curiosity and openness to unconscious vision; it would bring critique together with dwelling.

The visions Eleanor and Peggy experience are difficult to communicate in part because they are impersonal, and close to the communal and the unconscious; the novel as a whole has



shifted from the restrictive silence of Victorian falsehood to the silence that welcomes visions and struggles to articulate them. In the final pages of the novel, Nicholas makes a toast to the coming of age of the human race, describing a species, “now in its infancy, may it grow to maturity!” (312). Margaret Comstock has noted that the etymological sense of Nicholas’ toast is highly relevant, for throughout *The Years* people are so unable to finish sentences and communicate that the human race might very well be said to be in a state of infancy—it cannot yet speak (Comstock 258). The historical accumulation of experience in the unconscious mind is only beginning to be articulated.

### HOLTBY’S APPROPRIATION OF TRAGIC WISDOM

Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* (1936), like *The Years*, rehabilitates the spinster figure, suggesting that unmarried women have vital things to offer the community; it also demonstrates the necessity of combining the perspectives of older and younger women.<sup>11</sup> Holtby, who also wrote the first book-length study of Woolf, was an exemplar of just the kind of vital spinster that Woolf described in the character of Eleanor, to whom Holtby has frequently been compared.<sup>12</sup> But instead of focusing on issues of inheritance, Holtby’s aim in manufacturing an intergenerational alliance between her female characters is to appropriate a conservative woman’s perspective into its progressive vision. *South Riding* constructs youth and differently from *The Years*; for Sarah Burton, the younger woman, is a feminist and idealist rather than a cynic like Peggy; meanwhile the older woman, Mrs. Beddows, is a resigned, conservative stoic, rather than an enthusiast like Eleanor. It is the younger, rather than the older woman, who seems closer to the author’s own position in *South Riding*. And yet Holtby also emphasizes the importance of the insight of the older woman, using the structure of the novel to incorporate and appropriate aspects of a political perspective not her own into the motion of a liberal-feminist history. Holtby uses the aging female subject to represent a perspective of deep civic duty—despite the fact that the older women remain associated with a conservative political perspective Holtby

herself repudiates. The perspective that the novel advocates in its finale is a fusion of the perspectives of these two women, which are shown to be incomplete without each other.

Sarah Burton, the spinster protagonist of *South Riding*, is a woman nearing forty who starts over as headmistress of a school. But while Sarah is a vital spinster-figure and so a figure of resistance to the hostility against older women, she is also positioned as the younger woman in comparison to Alderman Mrs. Beddows. Though Sarah does fall in love in the novel, the most important combinations of perspective in the novel do not come from Sarah's romantic love, but rather from the dialogic relationship between these two women. The finale of the novel literally fuses the two women's words. Sarah begins the novel believing in the proverb that God says, "Take what you want . . . Take it—and pay for it" (161). This phrase seems at first to express a hard-headed, even cynical individualism, but Mrs. Beddows counters by asking, "But who pays?" (189). Sarah's view eventually becomes a combination of these, as by the end of the novel she comes to see that "we all pay . . . we all take; we are members one of another" (490). As Lisa Regan has noted, this dialogic exchange is itself a negotiation Holtby stages with the previous generation of feminists. The phrase, originally a Spanish proverb, is taken more immediately from the epigraph of Lady Rhondda's autobiography, *This Was My World*. Holtby suggested this autobiography was a little dated when she reviewed it, but in the novel, Sarah admires it wholly and recommends it to her students (Regan *Social Vision* 151). By depicting Sarah as an adherent of Rhondda's epigraph, whose views are in need of an emendation from the older Mrs. Beddows, Holtby reverses generational polarities, associating hard individualism not with the previous generation of suffragettes (Rhondda was born in 1883 and had employed Holtby at *Time and Tide*) but with Sarah's youthfulness. Because it is Mrs. Beddows' perspective that shifts Sarah's stance towards the communal, elderly women are incorporated instead of being superseded. Holtby suggests that what seemed at first to be a hard-headed awareness of the costs to the individual was itself naïve, because the individual can never make decisions in a vacuum.

Through this dialogic fusion, Holtby also appropriates the perspective of her own mother, who explicitly serves as the basis for Mrs. Beddows.<sup>13</sup> The logic of this appropriation is revealed in Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1935). Holtby there describes how modern women, with a life of their own outside the domestic sphere, may in fact make better mothers than women of previous generations, as between mother and child "there is less possessiveness and more comradeship, less discipline and more understanding" (145). Women and children can approach each other, that is, as whole people. Holtby then claims:

My own mother, though born over seventy years ago, is essentially "modern." As a country alderman, she finds life rich with varied and absorbing experience. I can visit or leave her without compunction, knowing that she has her life to live as much as I have mine; yet when we meet there is none of that awkwardness, that "making conversation," which I see between so many parents and children. In the future the child will be as much interested in the mother's career as the mother is in the child's, and the shared experience of two generations should be helpful to both. (145-46)

*South Riding* aims precisely at this "shared experience" of the two generations, joining the perspectives of a woman roughly Holtby's own age and a woman based on her mother. But in this passage Holtby also claims that her mother is already essentially modern, not because she is particularly liberal in her views, but simply because by working outside the home as a public servant she has freed herself from an identity based only on domesticity.<sup>14</sup> This claim is revealing in the light of Holtby's project to write a novel about local government, as she suggests that the experience imbibed by serving the local public makes one essentially modern and allied with liberal improvements, regardless of one's actual opinions.

The novel positions Sarah's progressive reforms in larger scales of temporality: Sarah sees herself as working to improve the human species, which she imagines as "a blind and stumbling race of savages, crawling up out of the primeval slime" (189). Sarah's central goal in the novel is the rescuing of a young girl, Lydia Holly, from the burdens of caring for her young

siblings after the death of her mother. The novel thus positions a third generation of women as the inheritors of the past, casting Lydia as a figure of potentiality and futurity—she reads Shakespeare and feels that “below all these present pleasures lay the lovely glowing assurance of future joy” (33). It might appear that the conservative and resigned perspective of Mrs. Beddows would be an impediment to this futurity. Mrs. Beddows claims that there is no great tragedy in a talented young woman remaining at home in a world where so many women have to do so, and asserts that her experience has shown her we must never try to do too much: “if you give too much here, another must go without there . . . We need patience” (188). This position of resignation is furthermore connected to the frustrated life Mrs. Beddows has lived under patriarchy. Her attitude is explicitly linked to her disappointments in marriage to a penny-pincher who constantly thrusts his own tiny victories in other people’s faces. Sarah believes Mrs. Beddows has been wasted by marriage, giving three-quarters of her energy to “quite unnecessary domestic ritual and propitiation” (183). Though Mrs. Beddows has done public work and thereby not been devoured by the shadow of male publicity, she has also been realistically embittered by her experience of men’s demands. And yet Holtby claims that even this experience of women’s lives under patriarchy has a valuable contribution to make to the future of the women’s movement, almost despite itself.

Holtby accomplishes this dialogic fusion through situating the virtue of humility as a more important contribution to progress than one’s actual opinion. Mrs. Beddows sees Sarah’s plan to save Lydia as egotistical, a desire to replicate herself in a star pupil. This is not entirely the case—Sarah also emphasizes Lydia’s relevance to the broader community, as she could grow up to be a role model, a new woman with a career. And yet Sarah does eventually come to see that her original version of progressive politics, which imagined the eventual conquering of chance, was in fact willful. Whereas previously Sarah had not had “much use for the defeated” (472), she adapts a perspective arguably more appropriate for an educator: “it’s no use only having a creed for the successful,” as Mrs. Beddows notes (473). The more nuanced and communitarian view

that emerges from the combined perspectives of the two women—"we all pay . . . we all take; we are members one of another"—does not disrupt Sarah's reformist ambitions, but furthers them. At the close of the novel, Sarah is still committed to leftist feminism, but having lost her love interest, Carne, to an accident, she has learned she cannot master chance. (And though Carne is killed by chance, Lydia is saved by chance: her father happens to meet an old friend and lands himself a new marriage, relieving Lydia of her domestic burden.) Having been humbled by the brutality of happenstance, Sarah concludes the novel still intending to work for liberal feminist causes, but no longer believing she can actually win—or entirely approve of herself for doing so. When Sarah tells the conservative Mrs. Beddows of her attempt to seduce Carne, she expects to be condemned, but is instead only told that having given up on liking herself, she has just begun to live: "And when there's no hope and no remedy, then you begin to learn and to teach what you've learned. The strongest things in life are without triumph" (473). Sarah does not only give up on willful striving, but also on approving of herself; it seems to be a central aspect of Holtby's sense of maturity that the mature person does not really like himself or herself. As a novel that gives credibility to characters of various political viewpoints, it is central to *South Riding* that the most laudable characters, though they may not agree, are all relentlessly hard on themselves. Both the socialist Astell and the conservative Carne are merciless towards themselves for failing their respective ideals, and neither really likes himself (273-74; 288-90). Sarah is represented as joining this company, and so the shared experience of multiple generations is refigured as a progressive humility.

Associating radical humility with age and repeated failure is perhaps a conventional way to imagine the perspective of an older woman. But this maneuver allows Holtby to position herself in such a way that the frustrations and pains of older women who have lived in more restrictive times, frustrations which may not in fact often find expression in progressive views, are still brought on board with her reformist project. Mrs. Beddows is an active, competent woman, but she does not necessarily have Eleanor Pargiter's openness, tolerance, or liberalism—

as indeed, many older women of the 1930s likely did not. But Holtby is able to position Mrs. Beddows' awareness of finitude as a progressive force in a weaker sense, by using her to assist Sarah in escaping egotism and seeing more clearly the human vulnerability that reformist projects are, after all, designed to assuage. While humanity may still be crawling out of a primeval swamp, as Sarah claims, it is simultaneously a species that has long steeped in vulnerability and failure; the liberal commitment to improving the world is ultimately a product of our memory of that history. If Sackville-West's portrait of old age was problematically romantic, too willing to see the subjectivity of the elderly exhausting itself in the encouragement of the young, Holtby's is certainly realistic, allowing for the possibility of bitterness, frustration, and conservatism in older women without thereby claiming that they have nothing to offer the march of history.

Sackville-West, Woolf, and Holtby associate different qualities with their older protagonists, but they all reconfigure progressive goals through reconsidering the contributions of the past as they have been stored and transfigured in the subjectivity of older female characters. In so doing, they recontextualize progressive movements in broader scales of history while simultaneously representing the value of women's subjectivity when it is not figured merely in terms of the future-potential of youth. In the context of an era driven by a belief in progress, the elderly are often framed by what Mary Russo calls the "scandal of anachronism" (20), symbolically cast aside by the cultural energies that demand everything be up-to-date. In the modernist period, the cultural valorization of youth was already well under way. But this valorization was often rejected by modernist authors, and many of modernism's most emblematic characters, from Lambert Strether to Leopold Bloom to Marlowe and to the female protagonists examined here, in fact represent their creators' belief in the need for an older mind to navigate the modern landscape. Such a shift away from youthful potential is arguably one of the signal gestures of modernism. But this gesture was frequently overlooked by earlier generations of critics who emphasized the youthful rebelliousness of the avant-garde. The loudest and most iconoclastic movements in the modernist period certainly emphasized their

novelty, and by extension, their youth; as F. T. Marinetti bragged in “A Manifesto of Italian Futurism” (1909) “the oldest among us are not yet thirty; this means that we have at least ten years to carry out our task. When we are forty, let those younger and more valiant than us kindly throw us into the wastebaskets like useless manuscripts!” (qtd. in Howe 171). In accordance with such pronouncements, modernism was initially associated with the rejection of inheritance and the rebellious impulse to start over, and this is one way that the modernist attitude to inheritance could be framed: Allan Helpburn defines one strain of modernism as “a literary practice in which renunciation of inheritances and self-dispossession from the past allow for new, politicized identities to emerge” (19). But the same critical interaction with inheritance can be achieved without its complete renunciation, and without the symbolic position of youth that shucks off the entire past at once. In many texts, especially by female modernist writers, it is aging characters who critically sift their inheritance and become representatively modern, not in their rejection of the past wholesale, but in their ability to reconsider and transmit the past after critical consideration.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the context of Woolf’s childhood, authority figures were coded as “old.” Alex Zwerdling notes the extent to which the individual contexts of Woolf’s childhood combined to create an atmosphere of reverence for old age: Queen Victoria seemed to have been in power forever, but also Woolf’s father was old enough that she felt he was more accurately described as her grandfather (Zwerdling 150).

<sup>2</sup> Gullette notes that this is one way some feminists depicted older women at the time, with a sympathy for those who suffered the strictures of the past that also restricted agency (235).

<sup>3</sup> The majority of the scholarly interest in Vita Sackville-West since the 1970s has stemmed from her relationship with Woolf. It is often claimed that some of Woolf’s creative energies were liberated by her relationship with Sackville-West; conversely, the majority of scholars seem to feel that the best of Sackville-West’s works are those she wrote after being influenced by Woolf’s style and political ideas (*All Passion Spent*, *The Edwardians*, *Seducers in Ecuador*). The influence of Woolf upon *All Passion Spent* is palpable, and the novel is accordingly regarded as one of Sackville-West’s best novels, and certainly as her most feminist and politically liberal one. De Salvo regards *All Passion Spent* as an “outgrowth” of Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (211). On the converse influence of Sackville-West on Woolf, see De Salvo (199); Lee (499).

<sup>4</sup> Joss West-Burnham reads the novel as a projection of Sackville-West’s own selfhood into old age as a way to negotiate its contradictions (39-42). Sackville-West’s biographer positions the

novel partially in terms of Vita's torn feelings about the simplification of life, pointing out that while the novel's "fierce simplicities" inspire many, Sackville-West herself never gave up any of her jewels (Glendinning 237).

<sup>5</sup> Sackville-West has often been criticized for the elitist politics implied in her pastoral works; Raitt reads Sackville-West's first two novels as "eugenic" fantasies, written as condemnations of the working class (41-61).

<sup>6</sup> It could be argued this shift began slightly before the writing of *All Passion Spent* (1931); Sophie Blanch reads *The Edwardians* (1930) in terms of a complex fantasy renegotiating inheritance to create a "feminine inheritance" which allows women to interact without the mediation of patriarchal laws (77).

<sup>7</sup> This quotation is only a small part of Woolf's complex negotiation with Freudian thinking; Woolf certainly did not think that Freud presented a completely accurate assessment of the mind, and not only because he saw the unconscious as timeless. Though Woolf makes no explicit mention of reading Freud until relatively late in her life, this may not mean that she read none at all before that point; Elizabeth Abel demonstrates how thoroughly Woolf must have been exposed to the tenor of Freud's thought even before reading him (Abel 13-29). Abel argues that Woolf uncovers feminist modes of casting the narrative of psychoanalysis, and so develops an alternative to Freud's patriarchal model.

<sup>8</sup> The feminist rehabilitation of the novel in the 1970s rescued it from being seen as a cynical failure or a portrait of resignation. Guiget (309) and Bazin (167-191) provide examples of earlier critics claiming the novel fails to convey its vision successfully. But Jane Marcus' important 1977 essay on *The Years* as a *Gottterdammerung* was instrumental in locating the patterns in the novel that led feminists to its re-evaluation (Marcus 36-56). Jane Wheare catalogues 30 pages worth of such subtle patterns (140-71). The argument for an optimistic movement in *The Years* towards a less authoritative, more feminist vision of society has been made by Patricia Waugh (121-3) and Susan Squier (177-9). Caughie argues that the novel does not end with optimism or pessimism but with uncertainty, making the text more amenable to postmodern strategies of reading (106). DuPlessis presents the version of this argument closest to my own, as she sees the ending of the novel in terms of a movement from the growth of the individual ego to a "collective *Bildung*" (163).

<sup>9</sup> In the manuscript version of the novel this moment was described as a much more intimate connection between the two women (Radin 104).

<sup>10</sup> The connection to *A Room of One's Own* is noted by Naremore (260); Bazin (176); Dowling (196). Holtby, in her book on Woolf, makes much of the taxicab image, appreciating its dissolving of divisions but also hinting at some difficulties with it (*VW* 161-85).

<sup>11</sup> Holtby made a campaign of defending spinsters from the charge of frustration—which she saw as Freudian in its origins. Lisa Regan notes that Holtby opposes this Freudian-derived model of spinster psychology with an Adlerian model based on the importance of "self-esteem" ("Inferiority Complex" 194-218). Adler's psychology, with its emphasis on the roots of one's self-image in the opinion of the broader community rather than the child-parent relations, is particularly suitable to Holtby's vision. On the Freudian elements of the attack on spinsters, see Oram.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Shaw notes that both Eleanor Pargiter and Holtby claim their lives have been "other people's lives" (*Years* 269; *Clear Stream* 253). Elsewhere, Shaw notes that Holtby may have served as an inspiration for the physical description of Kitty Malone in *The Years* ("Rewriting" 43).

<sup>13</sup> Holtby makes this clear in her introduction to the novel, while at the same time claiming that Mrs. Beddows cannot be completely identified with her mother. This was unfortunately not enough to keep Alice Holtby from feeling that she and other political figures in Yorkshire had been publically embarrassed (*Clear Stream* 43).

<sup>14</sup> As Shaw notes, Holtby's mother also remained "staunchly conservative" (*Clear Stream* 34).



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# Female Embodiment in the Marketing of Modernism

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the hypervisibility of women's gendered bodies circulating within modernist print culture. How are these bodies imaged and imagined? How are these bodies mystified and gendered? What kinds of violence do these constructions of feminine embodiment do to authorial bodies? I argue that the print circulation of several prominent modernist female editors and authors underscores the gendered marketing of modernism and the unsettling embodiment of these women within advertisements of their work. Many of these cases construct an uncanny doubleness in the authorial image: at once a heightened embodiment and an increased abstraction. I argue that the marketing of these women authors often leads to haunted and ghostly effects through this double edge that positions the female modernist as simultaneously mythical and manifest, concrete and spectral, material and abstract.

## KEYWORDS

Modernism, Women, Images, Marketing, Advertising, Print Culture, Embodiment

In my work on modernist print culture, I have become increasingly fascinated by the ways in which female embodiment is made at once complexly visible *and* mysteriously invisible in advertisements, on dust jackets, and in periodicals featuring women writers.<sup>1</sup> In “Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities,” Margaret Beetham addresses this strange relationship between embodiment and print culture; she asserts that writing “enables us to escape the finitude of our embodiment” (232), and argues that print erases and standardizes the body as “any physical marks of the individual (idiosyncrasies of hand writing and scribal error) disappear into a series of standardized fonts and identical texts” (232).<sup>2</sup> Yet she also notes that despite these possibilities and pitfalls offered by the seeming erasure of the body within printed texts, gender and gendered bodies were also rendered highly and complexly visible within modern print culture: “The high visibility of women in the press, therefore, as readers and journalists, as the subject of articles, interviews, gossip and pictorial representation cannot be read simply” (237). I’m intrigued by the hypervisibility of women’s gendered bodies circulating within modernist print culture. How are these bodies imaged and imagined? How are these bodies mystified and gendered? What kinds of violence do these constructions of feminine embodiment do to authorial bodies?

Many critics have noted the growing presence of women as consumers and producers of modern print culture, and recently critics are paying increased attention to how the images of women circulated within these visually-attuned print venues. Fiona Hackney documents the rise of women and female bodies in early twentieth-century print culture: “The novelty of female entry into what, until the first decades of the twentieth century, had been predominantly a masculine public realm did not pass unnoticed in the commercial press, and from the early 1920s women’s achievements in sports, the arts, and government, as well as the latest innovations in female dress, were regularly splashed across the media, including newspapers and magazines” (114).<sup>3</sup> Hackney persuasively argues that the meanings of this new “splash[ing]” of female bodies and women’s interests on the pages of magazines are constructed within the visually-focused

genre of magazines: “Magazine reading increasingly meant ‘looking,’ in these years” (119). While most of the critical conversation about women’s embodiment in print culture has focused primarily on women’s magazines, here I want to expand our view to consider several related cases when the embodied images of women modernist writers circulated within the wider realm of modernist print culture. My brief survey includes highbrow modernist little magazines like *The Little Review* and the *Athenaeum*, illustrated weekly newspapers like *The Sphere*, popular print venues like the *New York Times Book Review*, and the dust jackets and the frontispieces of published books.

In some cases, the reviews, advertisements, and book jackets seem keen to market the allure of their female authors through glamour. These marketing attempts resonate with Judith Brown’s recent work on glamour as complexly connected to modernist form. Brown argues for the elusive in-between-ness of glamour: “Glamour inheres in neither object nor subject, but is produced, most intangibly, in the space between them, in their interrelation. The difficulty of defining glamour, then, is explained here, in the space between subject and object, object and effect, materiality and immateriality” (9).<sup>4</sup> Using Laura Mulvey, Brown goes on to contend that glamour in the modernist era was often gendered and that “Feminized glamour emerges as a ‘fantasy space’ that masks a kind of terror, concealing a horror of female sexuality and the material body” (12). The cases that I explore show how female embodiment functions within the marketing of modernism: the images simultaneously make the female body alluringly iconic and crucial to the marketing of works by women, but also frustratingly manqué and humiliating due to the unglamorous revelations of the specific images chosen.

This essay moves between image/text relationships that flaunt our lack of access to these female bodies and others that suggest a violation of privacy in their unmasking revelations of the private authorial body. June Howard investigates the complex “charge[s]” in the cultural circulation of the boundary-crossing “New Woman” in early twentieth-century print culture: “the New Woman is a charged figure not only because she evokes the politics of gender—as she



certainly does—but also because she challenges the boundary between public and private . . . she inevitably provokes attention to, and potentially unsettles, the separation of individual from social, male from female, home from marketplace” (204). Indeed, I show how the particular form of the “New Woman”—the literary woman embodied by these female editors and authors—underscores the gendered marketing of modernism and the unsettling embodiment of these women within advertisements of their work. Many of these cases construct an uncanny doubleness in the authorial image: at once a heightened embodiment and an increased abstraction. I argue that the marketing of these women authors often leads to haunted and ghostly effects through this double edge that positions the female modernist as simultaneously mythical and manifest, concrete and spectral, material and abstract.<sup>5</sup>

## BREAKFASTING ON FUDGE

To begin, I offer the brief example of Margaret Anderson’s body at play in a centrally placed cartoon in the famous “Blank Issue” of *The Little Review* (September 1916). This cartoon plays with larger issues of gender and embodiment, absence and presence, hyper-visibility and blankness, and how they circulate within modern print culture more broadly through the case of the mostly “blank” issue of *The Little Review* which then gets surprisingly filled with the images of Anderson’s gendered body at play. The uncanny doubleness of female embodiment manifests on the pages of this issue of *The Little Review*. How do the materiality of the page and the materiality of the body become weirdly twinned in this example of modernist print culture featuring and constructed by its two women editors—Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap?

The issue’s front matter plays with the typographical rendering of absence and blankness as the cover page is dominated by two columns of strung together dashes and the opening pages proclaim the issue to be “a Want ad,” referring to the issue’s 13 pages that were “left blank.” These pages illustrate *The Little Review*’s famous construction of blankness and absence and its cultural legacy of validating and promoting its commitment to “Art” above all else. In the August

1916 issue that preceded the famous “Blank Issue,” Margaret Anderson opened the issue with her short piece, “A Real Magazine,” which articulates her goals for the magazine and concludes with her plan for the September issue: “I loathe compromise, and yet I have been compromising in every issue by putting in things that were ‘almost good’ or ‘interesting enough’ or ‘important.’ There will be no more of it. If there is only one really beautiful thing for the September number it shall go in and the other pages will be left blank. / Come on, all of you!”<sup>6</sup> Apparently, Anderson was not pleased with the response, as the September issue opens with the magazine’s restated commitment to only printing “Art” and positions the issue as a “Want Ad” with 13 pages left blank; the title page is blank except for the brief declaration: “*The Little Review* hopes to become a magazine of Art. The September issue is offered as Want Ad.”

While the issue certainly underscores the magazine’s commitment to blankness and establishes its highbrow aesthetic ambitions, the first *presence* on the pages is a humorous two-page cartoon spread playfully depicting Margaret Anderson and starring her multiply present, active, caricatured body:



Figure 1: First Non-Blank pages of *The Little Review* of September 1916. Cartoon captioned “Light occupations of the editor while there is nothing to edit,” drawn by Jane Heap.<sup>7</sup> Images courtesy of the Modernist Journals Project.

The cartoon spread disrupts any linear reading experience and also distorts any clear sense of temporality as “She practices eighteen hours a day and--/-takes her Mason and Hamlin to bed with her” in the midst of the many gerunds constructing her fantastically frantic body: “Breakfasting” “Suffering” “Converting” “Gathering” and “Swimming.” Heap’s drawings play upon the seemingly unrealistic expectations placed on Anderson’s laboring body and also highlight the idealized version of that body as capable of superhuman strength (hoisting her piano and gathering her own fire-wood). Heap’s images also foreground the gap between the idyllic public version and the actual version of Anderson in the opposing images of “the steed on which she has her picture taken” and “the insect on which she rides.” Most of the sketches involve Anderson’s body on display or bent or stretched with labor (both physical and mental), yet I’m particularly drawn to the image of Anderson breakfasting on a bounteous heap of “Fudge” while letting her hand—holding presumably a sheet of paper—drape luxuriously near the floor as she stretches out one leg. This image of inactivity plays with her body’s relation to paper as the materiality of the journal page itself becomes hyper-mediated through this self-referential gesture. While the dropped page here becomes visually overwhelmed by the dark mountain of fudge, the image directly below again places Anderson’s dynamic body in relation to paper as she straddles the fallen sheets and pamphlets that seem to indicate her source material—perhaps pages from *The Little Review* itself—for “converting the sheriff to anarchism and vers libre.”

Thus, even at its most “blank,” *The Little Review* maintains space for play and humor about female embodiment—caricaturing the mental and physical labor of the editors and indeed the hyper-visibility of the oft-criticized Anderson herself as too strongly present in the pages of

*The Little Review*. Jayne Marek positions the blank issue within the larger context of *The Little Review*'s "play with the magazine format itself" including the "Reader Critic" section and its construction of continual "interaction between the *Little Review*'s readership and its editors."<sup>8</sup> Critics have read the "blank issue" as a turning point in the magazine's history from a more idiosyncratic vehicle for Anderson's self-expression to a major circulator of highbrow literature that has become central to our understandings of literary modernism.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the "blank issue" was a key moment in the magazine's self-fashioning and drew responses that Anderson and Heap then printed from artists as widely ranging as Ezra Pound, whose contribution, "Das Schone Papier Vergeudet" ["The Beautiful Paper Wasted"], responds directly to the blank pages of the preceding issue,<sup>10</sup> and Frank Lloyd Wright, whose response links the magazine's aesthetics and troubled finances, "The less money *The Little Review* has the better it *looks* anyway!"<sup>11</sup>

I offer this brief example to show the strange construction of the editorial labor of the "New Woman" figured through female embodiment in modernist print culture. Here female editorial labor is made fantastically hyper-visible in the material form of "the Blank Issue" of *The Little Review*, which has been read as the epitome of the modernist commitment to highbrow aesthetics abstracted from material constraints like gendered bodies. Indeed, the issue has been read as a transitional movement away from the earlier more personal version of the magazine's commitment to Anderson's feminist politics. Yet a closer look at the issue's interruption of blankness with the hyper-embodied cartoon spread focused on Anderson's politicized body underscores how this transition occurs on the material pages of *The Little Review* upon and perhaps through the strained form of Anderson's body.

## TURNIP MANQUÉ OR BOILING KATHERINE'S BONES

Here, I turn from the usually invisible behind-the-scenes labor of female editors to the unsettlingly visual advertisement of a female author's works through her embodied image in the marketing and reviewing of Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss and Other Stories* published by Constable

in 1920. Mansfield is a suggestive figure for considering female embodiment in modernist print culture, as she famously died young from illness and posthumously became a looming cultural presence through her husband John Middleton Murry's idealization of her and her body. Both literary critics and Mansfield's contemporaries were critical of the marketing of her death and bemoaned how Mansfield lost control over her work and her embodied projection in culture due to invisible behind-the-scenes machinations of Murry. Jenny McDonnell cites Sylvia Lynd's scathing critique of Murry's posthumous construction of his wife through marketing: "Lynd described his generation of a Mansfield industry as 'boiling Katherine's bones to make soup'" (170).<sup>12</sup> The shockingly visceral image of Murry "boiling" his wife's "bones" to try to make a profit to feed on speaks to the violation implicit in his marketing of her work both after her death and even during her life.

For Mansfield, as for Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf, who I'll include in the next two cases, this entanglement of embodiment with publicity becomes emblematic of a vexed relationship between the author and her publics, a relationship that is often strangely mediated by uncontrollable visual images. McDonnell argues for renewed attention to the complexity of Mansfield's relationship with the literary marketplace and documents Mansfield's perceptions of her lack of control even while living: "she accepted the inevitability that she would only ever achieve 'a sort of authority' over her own work; likewise, she was aware that even this partial control would be relinquished entirely with her death . . . her career was driven both by an ongoing desire to ensure that her work was read by a number of publics and an anxious relationship with those publics" (172). McDonnell wants to complicate the old critical story that sees Mansfield as merely a helpless victim of Murry's bone-boiling and argues that "it is possible to replace Murry's most enduring editorial legacy – the invention of his serene 'dead child-wife' – with a new image of Katherine Mansfield, as the shrewd author at work within the literary marketplace" (173). McDonnell persuasively documents how Mansfield skillfully operated as a

keen negotiator of the literary marketplace and even contends that she embraced the short story form because of its popularity.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, McDonnell asserts that Mansfield's experience in the literary marketplace crystallized her critical attitudes about the leveraging of her gender in those markets: "it was precisely Mansfield's ability to occupy another marginal space — between 'literary' and 'popular'— that made her writing possible. Moreover, her prolonged engagement with the business world of different kinds of modernist literary publication eventually contributed to her request to be perceived as 'a writer first, and a woman after'" (12). Unfortunately, the marketing of *Bliss and Other stories* seemed bent on trading on her feminine glamour and wifely status over and above her literary contribution.

Virginia Woolf shared Mansfield's concerns that her status as "woman" would overshadow her profession as "writer;" Woolf's experiences trying to navigate the same gauntlet of "literary" and "popular" success led to her astute fears that the reception of her work would be gendered. Woolf anticipated the success of *Flush: A Biography* (1933) and dreaded it, writing in her diary three days before its Hogarth publication: "Flush will be out on Thursday & I shall be very much depressed, I think, by the kind of praise. They'll say its 'charming,' delicate, ladylike. And it will be popular . . . I must not let myself believe that I'm simply a ladylike prattler: for one thing its [sic] not true. But they'll all say so. And I shall very much dislike the popular success of Flush."<sup>14</sup> Woolf articulates her worries about the critical reception of *Flush* as fears of being derided and dismissed through faint praise tainted with belittling gendered qualifications: "ladylike" here becomes synonymous with "prattler" and is described as almost a necessary consequence of popularity. Woolf fears being easily classed with the hordes of scribbling "popular" "charming" writers because of her gender and because of the style and subject of *Flush*. Indeed, Woolf's fears were not unwarranted, and the two most negative reviews did dismiss the text precisely for its tone, for its silly subject matter, and even more so for its suspect popularity.<sup>15</sup> Mansfield's negotiation of popular success in her own career resonates with Woolf's

fears about “popular success,” and perhaps unsurprisingly both writers experienced regret and embarrassment over instances of their alien embodiment within modernist print culture.

The publication of *Bliss and Other stories* in 1920 by Constable was a pivotal moment in Mansfield’s career in terms of her control over her publication history. Before publication, she had to censor and cut from her story “Je Ne Parle Français” because of Michael Sadleir’s (her editor at Constable) demands (McDonnell 133). McDonnell argues that Mansfield reacted violently against these cuts at first, but then conceded for the money and that ultimately she was left feeling voiceless in protesting the publication and advertising of her work. Mansfield resented the way that *Bliss* was advertised in the *Athenaeum* (which seems directly borrowed from the paragraph on the book jacket): as “the ‘something new’ in short stories that men will read and talk about, and women will learn by heart but not repeat” (December 3, 1920) (see Figure 2).<sup>16</sup>

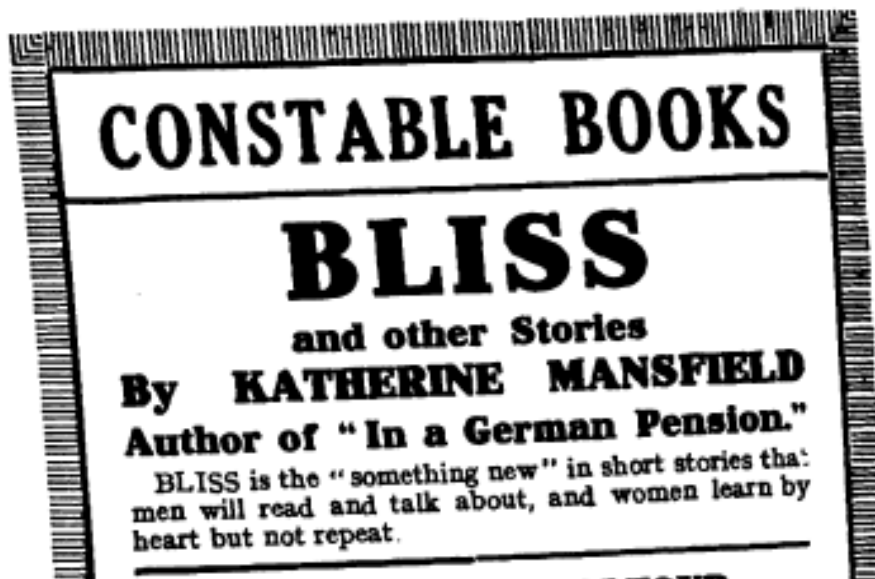


Figure 2:  
Advertisement  
for *Bliss and  
Other Stories* in  
the *Athenaeum*,  
3 December  
1920.

Mansfield articulates how upset she is about the cuts and about the packaging and advertisement of her book in a letter to Murry:

I suppose you will think I am an egocentric to mind the way Constable has advertised my book & the paragraph that is on the paper cover. Id [sic] like to say I mind so terribly that there are no words for me – No – I’m *DUMB!!* I think it is so insulting & disgusting

and undignified that – well – there you are! It's no good suffering all over again. But the bit about – 'Women will learn by heart and not repeat' – Gods! Why didn't they have a photograph of me looking through a garter! But I was helpless here – too late to stop it – so now I *must* prove – no – convince people ce n'est pas moi. At least if Id [sic] known they were going to say that no power on earth would have made me cut a word. I wish I hadn't. I was wrong – very wrong –. (*Letters Between Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry*, 329)

Mansfield describes herself as rendered “dumb” and “helpless” by the way in which Constable has packaged and marketed her book and is left speechless as “there are no words” to express her reaction to their “insulting” marketing of her gender. Indeed, the form of this letter – bursting with dashes, interruptions, piles of adjectives, and exclamations – underscores her frustrated attempts to protest this violating advertising strategy. Her fears about the photograph

of her “looking through a garter” seem to predict

; her horror at the photograph that they did use to advertise the book in some periodicals.



**Miss Katherine Mansfield**  
Author of a new volume of short stories entitled "Bliss," about to be published by Constable. She is the wife of the editor of "The Athenaeum."

While the *Athenaeum* advertisement uses words to problematically gender the readerly response to Mansfield's book, *The Sphere* advertises the book through an image of Mansfield herself and almost no mention of the book's contents at all (See Figure 3). *The Sphere* advertisement doesn't even list the full title of the volume and shockingly includes the irrelevant final sentence about her marital status as some sort of qualification for readership. McDonnell

Figure 3: Advertisement for *Bliss and Other Stories* from *The Sphere*, 6 November 1920.



documents how Mansfield wrote “to both Sadleir and Murry in protest about the photograph which accompanied this text when it appeared in *The Sphere*, in an attempt to prevent the reappearance of such an unflattering portrait, claiming that “[i]nstead of advertising Bliss it looked to *me* as though it ought to describe How I gained 28lbs. in One Month” (134).

Mansfield resented the circulation of this unauthorized image of herself and commented upon the strangeness of the inclusion of the photograph rather than any real advertising of *Bliss*—such that the picture could be an image featured in an advertisement about the effectiveness of weight gain supplements rather than an advertisement for a literary work.

In her letter of protest to her editor at Constable, Michael Sadleir, Mansfield stretched the truth about her “press agency” (McDonnell notes that she had no agency at this time and was relying on Murry to act as an agent) as she complains about the selected image and offers a preferable alternative:

My press agency posted me today a most AWFUL photograph of myself published in The Sphere. It was like a turnip or even a turnip manqué. Where it came from I don’t know. But only beautiful people can afford to let such frights of themselves be laughed at; plain ones have to be more cautious. So, in case anyone should ask my publishers for a more-or-less likeness would you see they are given this postcard? Its [sic] very unlikely the occasion will arise but after my horrid shock this morning I’d like to be prepared.

(*The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, Vol. IV*, 10 November 1920)

Here Mansfield humorously describes the image as an unsuccessful “turnip manqué” and as an embarrassing “fright” that will cause her to be “laughed at.” While Mansfield exaggerates her own authorial power through her invented press agency, she also emphasizes her lack of knowledge and wished-for-but-elusive control over the image—“I don’t know” and “can afford to let” and “have to be more cautious.” Indeed, Mansfield had even less control than she imagined as McDonnell documents how it was her own husband/“agent” Murry who had provided the photo and how Mansfield’s next letter to Sadleir apologizes for her error and

continues to play on the foreignness of the image: “I am sorry I lifted up my voice so loud – and I fully appreciate the position . . . Perhaps I ought to be thankful that J.M.M. didn’t send you a photograph of a complete stranger – by mistake – whom he’d ‘always thought’ was K.M.!” (McDonnell 135). Mansfield also sent a telegram to Murry instructing him to burn the offending photograph and also a letter describing her horror at the image before she realized that it was he himself who gave it to Constable to use:

Dearest Bogey,

I wired today about my photograph in the Sphere. I can't think who gave it to the papers. My vanity is awfully wounded. What a dogs life it is! Really I haven't got such beastly eyes & long poodle hair & a streaky fringe. . . . I feel quite ill with outraged vanity. Ive [sic] written to Sadleir & sent him a postcard. . . . I know you know how I *detest* it. Its [sic] not me. Its a HORROR. If its given to anyone please get it back. Fool I was not to have burnt it!

Tig. (*Collected Letters*, 10 November 1920)

Mansfield repeatedly references her vanity as “wounded” and “outraged” and then dehumanizes herself through the references to her “dogs life” and “beastly eyes” and “long poodle hair.” She then assumes that Murry understands her hatred of “it” based on its misrepresentation of her: “Its not me. It’s a HORROR.” Again, Mansfield plays with the ghostly language of “frights” and “horrors” and un-likeness to describe the offending image that so unsettles her as to make her “feel quite ill.”

Once she discovered that Murry was the one responsible for the image’s circulation, Mansfield ended her professional relationship with Murry: McDonnell documents that Mansfield “resigned as reviewer for the *Athenaeum* within weeks and dismissed Murry as her agent within days” (135). Indeed, Mansfield uses this experience with the unauthorized image of her authorial body to gain greater control over her circulation within print culture and later imagines her literary legacy through the alternative material remainder of embodied books: “I do not want to

die because Ive [sic] done nothing to justify having lived yet. But if I *had* done my work Id [sic] even go so far as to die. I mean to jolly well keep live with the flag flying until there is a modest shelf of books with K.M. backs” (*Collected Letters*, Vol. IV, 146-7). Here, Mansfield imagines the books themselves—rather than an authorized “turnip manqué” image of herself—as the proper embodied authorial stand-in, and the production of these “backs” becomes the focus of her authorial energies and control.

### “SHOT ONCE TOO OFTEN”

Much like Mansfield, Djuna Barnes is a modernist author who was often advertised and canonized through her glamorous body and through photographic reproductions of her image. Here, I will briefly examine Boni & Liveright’s complexly embodied marketing and packaging strategies for Djuna Barnes’s strange 1923 text, *A Book*. Recently, critics have begun to revitalize interest in Djuna Barnes—a modernist figure whose writings have been constantly linked to her glamorous authorial body. As Daniela Caselli has signaled in her monograph, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus*, critics continue to struggle to make sense of Barnes’s work within larger narratives of modernist literary history. Playing with the double resonance of “corpus” to conflate text and body, Caselli compellingly argues that Barnes’s outsider status within the modernist canon is linked to her experimental form and her gendered body: “gender and sexuality are essential components of this anachronistic, inopportune, and impenetrable modernism.”<sup>17</sup> Caselli argues that criticism devoted to Barnes is characterized by “a pervasive presence of pictures of Barnes” and that “her bewildering language is turned into the beautiful female body, ‘symbol and vehicle for the consumption of Bohemia.’”<sup>18</sup> While Caselli attributes this fascination with Barnes’s body to the author’s interest in duplicitous figures of femininity, I would add that the publication history of Barnes’s *A Book* in 1923 and its marketing strategies that leverage Barnes’s photographic portrait and her looming imagined body have inspired and underwritten this continual linking of Barnes’s texts and her body. These readings place the

“illegible” and “bewildering” work of Barnes within networks of meaning and marketing which leveraged her experimentation, her difficulty, and her mythicized female body and thus connect to recent work on Barnes, like Caselli’s, that analyze how and why criticism has been “haunt[ed]” by Barnes’s “own caped body.”<sup>19</sup>

In the internal flaps of their dust jacket for *A Book*, Boni & Liveright foreground Barnes’s authorship and her embodiment through their text and imagery. Barnes’s name and photographic portrait appear at the top of the inner front flap, and in her small portrait Barnes looks to the left-hand margin—her gaze crossing the material boundaries of her book and also not looking directly at the viewer. The jacket text markets Barnes by echoing her intriguing mix of the concrete and the abstract, the feminine and the frightening:

**Here are things written down and drawn by a woman who acknowledges the charm of unnecessary evil,** but cheers existence not because it is beautiful or ugly but because of the sublime folly of its persistency.

Her people are not marked with a bustling bankruptcy; she deals with America as if it were—like Europe—dignified by time, and **of course she is personal.**

In these plays, stories, poems and drawings, we sense a desire to make the world dangerous for democracy.

**It is evident that she has been shot once too often. But what a gallant wound!**

**What a devastating convalescence.** (Emphasis added)<sup>20</sup>

The jacket text develops a physical link between Barnes’s body and her writing—“things written down and drawn by a woman”—that becomes complexly entangled with the form of *A Book* itself as somehow embodying the material *evidence* of her “shot” “wound[s]” and also of her “devastating convalescence.”<sup>21</sup> Framed by the image of Barnes’s photographed profile, the jacket subtly builds up Barnes’ presence as somehow entwined with both the book and her writerly body that produced it; this twining is crystallized in the surprising, concluding image of *A Book*

as inviting us to witness and even marvel over—"But what a gallant wound!"—her injured and convalescent body.

Boni & Liveright's notices and advertisements for *A Book* often invoke Barnes's body to hawk the experimental volume's generic and multi-media mixings. In their marketing of the book—both in the jacket text and in various advertisements—Boni & Liveright continually emphasize the strangeness of *A Book* as corresponding to the eccentricity of Barnes herself. Boni & Liveright promoted the avant-garde text through multiple notices and advertisements in the periodicals: an announcement of new books in *Publisher's Weekly* echoes the enigmatic description from the jacket text to market *A Book* as a collection of "Plays, stories, poems and drawings by a woman who acknowledges the charm of unnecessary evil."<sup>22</sup> Additionally, a Boni & Liveright advertisement in *The New York Times Book Review* features a portrait of Barnes and reads: "Illustrated with remarkable drawings from her own brush, this book of stories, plays and poems is a complete representation of the work of one of the most intriguing personalities in modern American letters—truly 'a woman of infinite variety.'"<sup>23</sup>

In an advertisement in *Broom*, Boni & Liveright again include the image of Barnes in profile (seen in the inside flap of the jacket) and proclaim: "That almost mythical personality that has loomed so largely and intangibly over modern art in America —Djuna Barnes — has here made itself manifest in a book as individual as its creator."<sup>24</sup> While these items attempt to market the book through sketching Djuna Barnes herself as an eccentric and "intriguing" woman and as an "intangibly" "loom[ing]" literary figure, they cannot quite mask that in 1923 Barnes was an undefined figure—"almost mythical"—with no widely circulated book volumes to her name. These advertisement build on the popularity of her mythic authorial body to suggest that *A Book* will allow for the consumption of its author "made manifest in a book." The marketing of Barnes here again plays on an uncanny doubleness where the "intangibl[e]" "mythical" modernist woman can also be "made manifest in a book."

### **“OH RIDICULOUS CRUMPLED PETAL” & “A PLAIN DOWDY OLD WOMAN”**

While Virginia Woolf had more control over her own publication and circulation within print culture than either Mansfield or Barnes due to her self-publication through the Hogarth Press, she still had moments when she circulated in forms that exceeded her control. Earlier I cited her fears about the uncontrollably and perhaps inevitably gendered responses to the popular success of *Flush*, and while she was writing that book she also expressed fears about the publication of her own embodied image in a frontispiece to an early biography. In her diary entry for September 16, 1932, Woolf conflates her stress over writing *Flush* and her anxiety over her public portrayal in the memoir's frontispiece:

I'm in such a tremor that I've botched the last—penultimate chapter of *Flush*—it is worth writing that book--& can scarcely sit still, & must therefore scribble here, making myself form my letters, because—oh ridiculous crumpled petal—Wishart is publishing L.'s snap shot of me instead of the Lenare photograph & I feel that my privacy is invaded; my legs show; & I am revealed to the world (1,000 at most) as a plain dowdy old woman. How odd! I never gave the matter a thought till this morning. I sent the photographs off with some compunction at being too late. Now I'm all of a quiver—can't read or write; & can, rightly, expect little sympathy from L. What an ill joined web of nerves—to be kind—my being is! A touch makes the whole thing quiver. What can it matter? The complex is: privacy invaded, ugliness revealed—oh & that I was trapped into it by Wishart. Lord!<sup>25</sup>

The snapshot in question did serve as the frontispiece for Winifred Holtby's "critical memoir" of Woolf published by Wishart in 1932 (see Figure 4) and also later was reproduced (with the legs tastefully cropped out) as the frontispiece for the second volume of Quentin Bell's biography (1972).

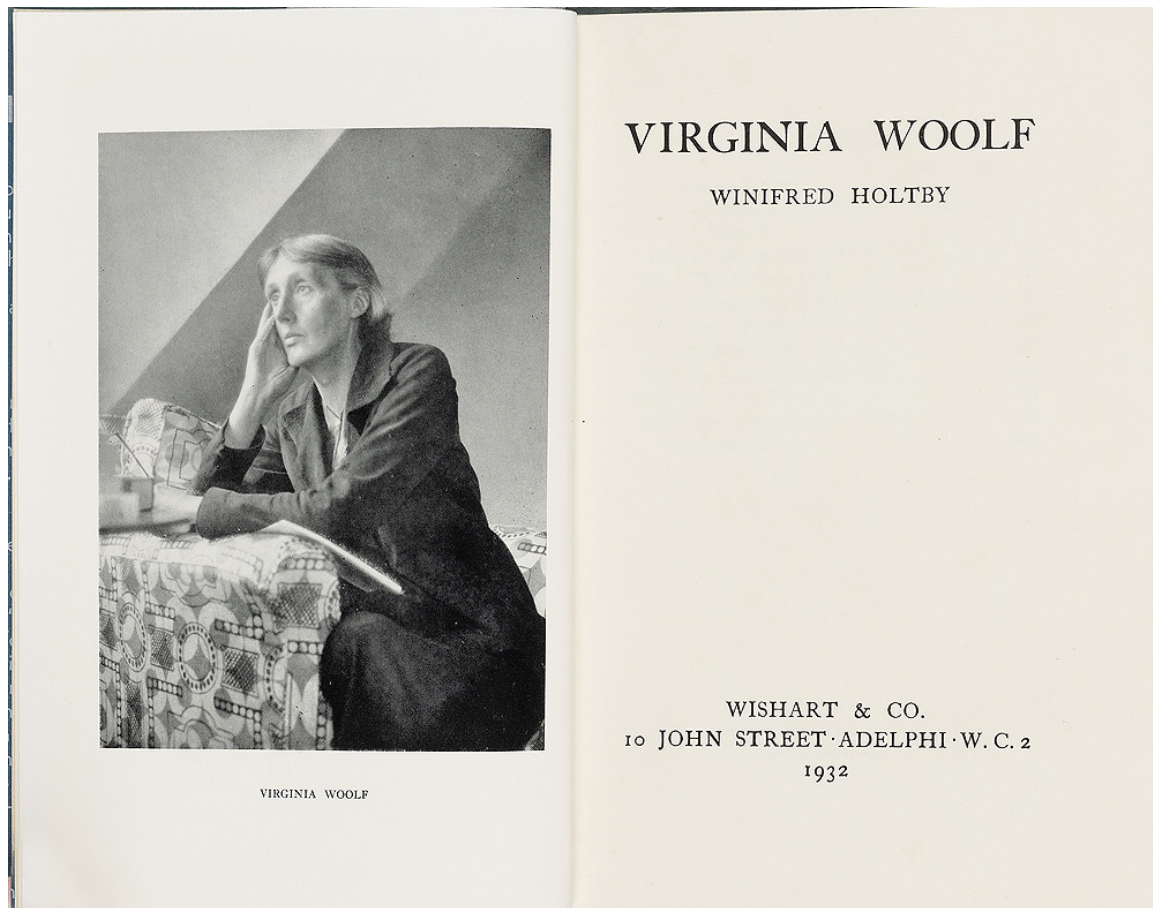


Figure 4: Snapshot of Woolf, frontispiece for Winifred Holtby's *Virginia Woolf*, 1932.



Figure 5: Lenare Photograph of Virginia Woolf reproduced in *Lenare: The Art of Society Photography, 1924-1977*, 1981.

In her diary entry, Woolf articulates her preference for the Lenare image (see Figure 6) with its smirking, challenging gaze back at the viewer, its ambiguous studio backdrop, and its ethereal, halo-like lighting rather than the snapshot image with its revelation of her crossed legs in the foreground, the suggestion of her domestic space in the background, and the far-away look away from the camera which suggests that the photo was taken while its subject was caught unaware of the lens. Indeed the open notebook or book on her lap suggests that the snapshot image captures “the-artist-at-work;” her strangely twisted position on the chair, seemingly rotated to her side as she rests her notebook and hands on the chair arm, draws the viewer’s attention to



Woolf's body and suggest its active participation in her writing process. With its emphasis on the space of her home and on her writing process as embodied and its suggestion that it was a candid "snapshot," the Holtby frontispiece promises the viewer a scopophilic glimpse of the private life and body of Woolf. Perhaps, then, it is no wonder that Wishart chose the snapshot for Holtby's critical memoir, which promised readers just such an intimate glimpse of Woolf. And it is also unsurprising that this latter photo and the version of the artist that it circulated so upset Woolf that she could not write and felt violated as the photo "invaded" her "privacy" and projected an undesirable image to consumers of her public image.

Woolf's concerns about the invasive gesture of the frontispiece to Holtby's biography cluster around fears of being seen as a too-embodied subject (as having legs and as being "a plain dowdy old woman") rather than as a somewhat ethereal iconic face (no body, just erudite head, as in the Lenare image). Woolf's concerns over managing her own photographic image and her fears that the reading public will harshly interpret the revelation of her legs suggest that she was very aware of the potential readerly desires for authorial bodies—particularly female authorial bodies.

## AN UNGLAMOROUS CONCLUSION

While in my final example Woolf herself was the culprit who allowed the offending image to circulate, her response echoes Mansfield's response in terms of the sense of violation and symptoms of physical illness and bodily weakness; Woolf emphasizes her bodily collapse into a "ridiculous crumpled petal" as she dehumanizes herself much as Mansfield's self-description in her letters reacting to the "turnip"-y and "beastly" image. Woolf reiterates the horror of unwanted "revelation:" "I am revealed to the world . . . as a plain dowdy old woman" and "the complex is: privacy invaded, ugliness revealed." Both Woolf and Mansfield resented the blurring of boundaries between public and private that caused them to feel like unauthorized or at least undesired images of themselves that misrepresented and violated their authorial bodies and

distracted from their literary work. Anderson & Heap played with blankness and the cartoon contortions of Anderson's editorial body and similarly engaged with the unrealistic expectations that their readers might have about feminine embodiment within print culture circulation and production. In the marketing of these women writers and editors, the packaging and advertisements use images of authorial embodiment—both photographic and textual—to blur the boundaries between public and private, author and text, woman and writer. Indeed, in all of these cases the authorial female body seems to haunt or even replace the literary product that is being marketed. The results of these circulating “frights” often leave the authors feeling violated, dehumanized, ill, and voiceless. These reactions underscore the paradox wherein becoming intensely embodied also creates feelings of disembodiment, of out-of-bodiness, of inhumanity. For these women modernists, being made “manifest” in print creates an uncanny and uncontrollable embodiment that is transferred onto the book or printed image. These doubles—the “not-me,” “turnip” ghosts—sicken, haunt, and violate the authorial imagination even as they enable the marketable glamour of modernist women authors by blending the abstract and the concrete, the mythical and the manifest. And perhaps we can connect these experiences of circulating as a *photographically* embodied woman in modernist print culture to *A Book's* evocative jacket description of Barnes' body as being “shot once too often.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much of this material is adapted from multiple chapters of my book, *Modernist Experiments in Genre, Media, and Transatlantic Print Culture* in the Ashgate Studies in Publishing History: Manuscript, Print, Digital Series (Routledge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Beetham, “Periodicals and the new media: Women and imagined communities,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (2006): 231-240.

<sup>3</sup> Fiona Hackney, “‘Women are News’: British Women's Magazines 1919-1939,” *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media/Emerging Modernisms*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Brown, *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Sheehan was extremely helpful in articulating this conception of the uncanny doubleness at work in this piece.

<sup>6</sup> *The Little Review*, 3.5 (August 1916) 2. *The Little Review* began in January 1914 and had run 25 issues before making this plea/proclamation. All of these images are taken from the Modernist

Journals Project site and their scan of the Blank issue:

([http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1295552160506125&view=mjp\\_object](http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1295552160506125&view=mjp_object)).

<sup>7</sup> *The Little Review*, 3.6 (September 1916) 14-15. Elizabeth Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words: Feminism and Modernism in America* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2002) 65. Francis remarks on the cartoon's representation of the editor's life and linking art to the systems that support it: "A two-page cartoon was prominently featured in the middle of the issue, dividing the blank pages from the regular departments. Titled 'Light Occupations of an Editor While There is Nothing to Edit,' the cartoons of Anderson were drawn by Heap, and they parodied the photo layouts of debutantes on the society pages in newspapers and magazines. They depict Anderson in a gamut of unconventional activities made somehow ordinary by their lightness and irony, eating fudge for breakfast, wearing a skimpy bathing suit, attending lectures by Emma Goldman, and haranguing a sheriff about free verse and anarchism. The cartoons mark the border between art and the secondary practices that support art, its connection to and grounding in the world, and they moor the *Little Review* to the life of the editor, rather than merely to the 'art' the magazine sought to present. Moreover, their representation of Anderson's life stood out even more since the surrounding pages were blank" (65).

<sup>8</sup> Jayne E. Marek, *Women Editing Modernism: "Little" Magazines & Literary History* (Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1995) 80. Marek focuses on the September 1916 issue as the most visible case of their experimentation: "The comments about the so-called 'blank' issue of September 1916 offer perhaps the most obvious case. This number sported sixteen empty [sic] pages, a number of drawings by the recently arrived Heap, and some commentary pronouncing on the nature of 'Art' and criticizing the lack of high-quality submissions. This half-blank issue struck many as a superb example of avant garde insouciance; certainly Heap and Anderson reveled in the attention this issue drew, and they printed a number of responses in later issues of the magazine, including Ezra Pound's first contribution, 'Das Schone [sic] Papier Vergeudet.' ['The Beautiful Paper Wasted'] Even in the issue itself, the editors printed letters commenting on the 'threat' of leaving pages blank, which Anderson had made in her August 1916 editorial." (80)

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Francis reads the blank issue as emblematic of both the feminist self-expression from the magazine's early history (in the cartoon) and the desire for high "Art" that colored its future: "The blank issue . . . marked a transition; over the next few years, the magazine's 'Want Ad' for art was clearly answered, and the *Little Review* published work that has certainly become some of the most important of the century, especially Joyce's *Ulysses*. Yet the larger project of the *Little Review* as an 'advertisement' for self-expression was derailed, appropriated by the very forces of 'art' it claimed to support. While feminist forms of self-expression, such as the blank issue, disrupted the conventions of art, this political aesthetic was squeezed out by the refinement and reification of literary art that rose to take the place of the older culture the *Little Review* had helped demolish." (66)

<sup>10</sup> Pound's short contribution is a two page plea to the editors to consider the conditions limiting "Art" in the United States; he begins: "Before you issue another number of your magazine half blank, I must again ask you seriously to consider the iniquity of the present 'protective' tariff on books" (*The Little Review*, 3.7 [November 1916], 16).

<sup>11</sup> *The Little Review*, 3.6 (September 1916) 26. Lloyd Wright's response—printed in the "Reader Critic" section of the blank issue—plays with blankness and representing absence with its use of a long ellipsis to mark Lloyd Wright's sense of ending and impossibility: "Your resolve is interesting—but it looks like the end. . . . I don't see where you can find the thing you need. / But miracles do happen—I wish I had a million or a pen."<sup>11</sup> The ellipsis thus provides a lacuna that both divides and connects the architect's vision of finality and his failure to envision the desired discovery. The ellipsis connects his vision explicitly with the typographical features that *The Little Review* consistently links to blankness and absence. While Frank Lloyd Wright's comments don't explicitly reference Heap's cartoon sketches of Anderson's contorted body, the

repeated emphasis on the physical “looks” of the magazine does perhaps signal the beauty of the image as superior to the usual textual features.

<sup>12</sup> Jenny McDonnell, *Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace: At the Mercy of the Public* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

<sup>13</sup> McDonnell argues that the choice of this genre both helped Mansfield reach her audience and has influenced her place in modernist literary history: “Mansfield’s practice of the ‘suspiciously popular’ short story form was one of a number of factors that long consigned her to the margins of modernism” (11).

<sup>14</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. IV, 1931-1935. (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 181.

<sup>15</sup> Woolf responds in her diary to the review of Geoffrey Grigson, a “poet and critic and at this time literary editor of the Morning Posts, [who] wrote of *Flush* in the issue of 6 October, 1933: ‘Its [sic] continual mock-heroic tone, its bantering pedantry, its agile verbosity make it the most tiresome book which Mrs Woolf has yet written’” (qtd. in *Diary*, vol. IV, 185). She also responds to the nastier *Granta* review (October 25, 1933): which laments that “. . . the deadly facility of [Flush] combined with its popular success mean . . . the end of Mrs Woolf as a live force. We must mourn the passing of a potentially great writer who perished for lack of an intelligent audience” (qtd. in *Diary*, vol. IV, 186). About this second review, Woolf writes: “I wish I could get [my head] full & calm & unconscious. This last is difficult, owing to *Flush*, owing to the perpetual little spatter of comment that keeps me awake. Yesterday the *Granta* said I was now defunct. Orlando Waves *Flush* represent the death of a potentially great writer. This is only a rain drop; I mean the snub some little pimpled undergraduate likes to administer, just as he would put a frog in ones bed: but then there’s all the letters, & the requests for pictures—so many that, foolishly perhaps, I wrote a sarcastic letter to the N.S.—thus procuring more rain drops” (186).

<sup>16</sup> McDonnell notes that Mansfield “reacted with contempt to the way in which this advertisement projected a gendered reception of her work . . . Her anger at being sold to the public in these terms provides a further indication of her increased determination to control the marketing of her work and the public representation of her authorial persona” (134).

<sup>17</sup> Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) 4. Caselli notes Barnes’s fame as a figure and marginalization as a writer: “Barnes is still a minor twentieth-century figure, existing more as part of evocative cityscapes than as a modernist writer in her own right. Appearing more often in paragraphs than in monographs, she moves across, without long-standing associations, the protean artistic groups that make up the American and European literary histories of the period going from decadence to later modernism, from New York to Berlin, London, and Paris” (1).

<sup>18</sup> Caselli, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Caselli, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Here I have quoted the complete text from the internal back flap of the jacket. The text from the front flap plays upon Barnes’ cosmopolitanism: “Djuna Barnes is not only a noted figure in Greenwich Village, but in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, London—the artistic capitals of the world. Her unique and diverse talents, expressed in plays, stories, poems and pictures have won her a unique position, and she has at last been persuaded to give the world a collection of her finest work.” Thus, Boni & Liveright begin by emphasizing Barnes’ international status before claiming that she has transformed the American into the elevated, eternal European, “dignified by time.”

<sup>21</sup> In one negative review from *the Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger* from December 1, 1923, the Reviewer ends by explicitly commending the strange jacket text: “If one is looking for literature, he can pass this collection by without great loss; if for mere amusement, he need not go beyond the jacket blurb. This blurb is a rarity even among its fellows.” The same reviewer begins the review by questioning the title’s gesture: “Was it droll audacity that named this—‘A Book’—an

unconcerned gesture toward the world of readers? Presumably the work was meant to be taken seriously, and indeed, it may be. However, this collection of sketches, short stories, verse and dramatic pieces, seems hardly worth while enough to be deserving of real attention.” Djuna Barnes Papers, Series IV, Box 1, Folder 11 (Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, MD). Hereafter cited as DBP with Series, Box and Folder Information.

<sup>22</sup> DBP, Series IV, Box 1, Folder 11 (Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, MD).

<sup>23</sup> DBP, Series IV, Box 1, Folder 11.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Soto, “Jean Toomer and Horace Liveright; or, A New Negro Gets ‘into the Swing of It,’” *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Michel Feith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001) 182.

<sup>25</sup> Entry for Friday, September 16, 1932, *Diary*, vol 4, 124.

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# METAPHOR AND THE LIMITS OF PRINT IN EZRA POUND'S *CANTOS*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ezra Pound's collected *Cantos* presents textual scholars with a challenge. Parts of the poem were published in little magazines, in newspapers, in fragments and in deluxe editions. No definitive edition of the *Cantos* exists, and the poem's difficulty, though often figured as an interpretive difficulty, was just as much a textual difficulty. Just as the text of the poem itself is complex, so Pound's own metaphors about the nature of print, textuality, and poetry are multifarious and shifting throughout the poem. This essay reads Pound's own language of textuality and orality in the *Cantos* alongside his comments on modernist print culture in order to argue that Pound consistently tested the limits of material textuality even as he drew metaphorical power from the language of book history and print culture.

## **Keywords**

Book History, Print Culture, Textual Studies, Metaphor, Modernism, Orality, Ezra Pound



“And even I can remember  
 A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,  
 I mean for things they didn’t know  
 But that time seems to be passing.”  
 —Ezra Pound, *Canto XIII* 60<sup>1</sup>

The tremendous number of instructional books about “how to read” Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* is indicative of more than an attempt to simplify “modernist difficulty.”<sup>2</sup> These texts and, indeed, Pound’s own instructive projects in *ABC of Reading* (1960) and *Guide to Kulchur* (1952), offer ways of narrowing the epic down into a manageable reading experience. Pound himself suggested an anti-analytical approach in which “the proper way to read is to run on when anything isn’t comprehensible,” and advised that the best thing to do is to attend to “what is on the page” (*Art of Reading* 152). While perhaps the most obvious purpose of such instructions is to clarify conceptual difficulties and interpretive impasses, another basic obstacle to reading presents itself in the case of Pound’s *Cantos*: textual ambiguity that tests the limits of printed form. Not only are aspects of the richly intertextual and inter-linguistic poem challenging to the reader in following the sense of the language, the literal “page” itself – with its specific kind of ink, its paper, and its typography – has metaphorical resonance for Pound. I argue here that Pound’s metaphors of printing and production figure the *Cantos* as an essentially unpublishable epic that resists the strictures of print. Though the New Directions edition which is now commonly used provides one version of the poem, the *Cantos* itself exists as a much more complex textual entity with reams of drafts, fragments, and spoken pieces that exist behind the poem itself. This paper examines Pound’s metaphors of material production and argues that printing is, like authoring, paradoxically both generative and limited by nature. What Pound means by the phrase “what is on the page” is, in this framework, both material and literary. I do not mean here to align myself with Pound’s own likely changeable and perhaps even ironic directive about how to read his life’s work, but rather to examine what readers and scholars at different moments in the textual history of *The Cantos* might have seen “on the page” and how Pound’s literary explorations of

printing and production interact with the various versions of the poem's materiality. Materiality, in Pound's hands, is varied, strange, and full of meaning: new technologies of print that accompany modern technologies affect, too, the way we think of Modernist language and its transmission. Mixing old textual forms (handset typography, wood blocks, and even oration) with new (photolithography and mass production) allows Pound to present an aesthetic of modernist print culture that echoes the nearly limitless, unbound poetic form he strives for in the epic.

In order to investigate what it is that produces such anxiety about reading and analyzing the *Cantos*, it is helpful to start with some idea of how it was made. Given the complex, unmanageable, and largely unresolved problem of textual studies for the *Cantos*, it seems fruitful to examine Pound's own language of material production alongside the long poem's overwhelming paper trail in order to explore some of the many roles that book production and print culture play in the poem's vastness.

Intaglios, ideograms, ephemeral documents, newspapers, money, and speech are all troped in the *Cantos* as forms of expression that investigate the complexity and value of the material qualities of language. The function of these textual metaphors in the poem seems often directive, offering the reader ways of seeing the mutable textual form of the long poem against historical examples of different kinds of print. One of the chief distinctions between types of production is the difference between what seems fixed or stable, like the monumental "Great bulk, huge mass" of "thesaurus" (V 17) and what is ephemeral and fading, like the blanks left by historians for the unknowable, into the past. Although it might initially seem logical that ephemera is associated with speech, and monumental metaphors with printed texts, the two types of images often interpenetrate, and both types indicate an appreciation of tactile, materialized form.

The printed features of Pound's own poem simultaneously call attention to themselves and also indicate their own limits (which are, of course, the edges of the page, but also the white

spaces and the deliberate fracture using spatial disruption of frequent and often seemingly random indentation, and the illustrative features like the ideograms and Canto XXII's typographical sculpture of a signpost). The limits of print are also sometimes extended through the use of orality, and the attention to speech and spoken transmission of literature runs throughout the epic. Frequently the images of print and speech in the text produce a sense of overwhelming proliferation of language that also contributes to Pound's very definition of his art: "[poetry] it differs from [other arts] in its media, to wit, words as distinct from pigment, pure sound, clay, and the like" (360).

The poem as it exists in the form that most readers now encounter is quite different than the initial project begun in 1912. Lawrence Rainey's edited volume *A Poem Containing History* (1997) offers a variety of perspectives on the fractured textual history of the poem, and he describes the "publishing odyssey" (3) as one that moved in most cases from one or two cantos published in a journal, to a book publication of the same cantos, to eventually a collection of all of the extant sections (including the posthumously published "Drafts and Fragments") issued by New Directions in 1975, three years after Pound's death, and reprinted many times since. The publishing process embodied the combination of monumental and ephemeral as much as did as the epic itself: various parts appeared in twenty-five journals in seven different countries on three continents and took a variety of physical forms, meeting with diverse audiences around the world (Rainey 3). One of the most interesting and complex examples of an early periodical publication was Canto LXXIII, which was excised from many post-war editions due to sensitive and Fascist-friendly content, but was first printed in *La Marina Repubblicana*, a newspaper for Italian sailors, in 1945.

The shifting modulations of the poem as they were published in different journals reinforce the complexity of the epic as the work of a life, and the material circumstances of publication changed with Pound's developing literary and political reputation. The unusual combination of limited special editions with the larger trade publications produced by Faber and

New Directions meant that the limits of textual production were malleable for the *Cantos*. The terminal poems, for example, are grouped under the textually descriptive title of “Drafts and Fragments,” which was in this case a metaphor to describe their literary mutability and re-inscribability as well as the absence of authorial approval for their publication. Pound’s sketches, notes, drafts, revisions, and annotations for the two Maletesta Cantos alone comprise over 700 pages of rough work and documentation, and nearly the same quantity of background work exists for the entirety of the 824-page poem (Rainey 7). The “Drafts and Fragments,” then, are really drafts of drafts and fragments of fragments. There is far more in the way of “Drafts and Fragments” than will ever be published, since the sheer volume of material exceeds what scholars have been able to manage. This staggering amount of physical paper also leaves out the oral elements of composition, which Hugh Kenner argues were central to Pound’s authorship: “we have accounts of the odd inarticulate chant he’d utter as he worked, shaping the sound of a line, the sound of a passage, groping after words that could mime that shape” (21).

A particularly clear example of the limitations and boundaries of scholarly attention, *The Cantos* and its pre-publication ephemera have been such a massive and near impossible undertaking that there is still no textually sound or comprehensive critical edition. To have written a work that resists even a variorum edition is also to have produced an epic that remains essentially oral or ephemeral in its ideal form. It seems in some ways that this was part of Pound’s aim: to produce a poem that is unknowable and unimaginable in its entirety. Perhaps this also explains the seemingly fervent desire of his readers for clarity and copious production of explanatory and instructional books on how to read this unwieldy poem.

This fundamental orality as an idealized form of transmission for poetry is evident in the metaphors throughout the *Cantos*. The references to speaking and speech in the *Cantos* far outnumber those to printing. The performative “I speak” occurs several times in the poem, and is perhaps a gesture at the opening of the *Aeneid*’s “I sing,” but also adds the rhetorical grandeur of self-narration. In Canto XXXVI, the phrase is repeated in a section that mimics the

formalities of archaic amorous verse: “A lady asks me / I speak in season,” and later “I speak to the present knowers,” by which, it is implied, Pound means his readers as well as the audience of his imagined oration (177). In addition to the self-declaring gestures of speech, the whole Canto typographically employs ornamental capital letters and several self-referential gestures that translate “I speak” to “I write” by mixing oral and textual. When Pound addresses the Canto directly (as “song” which is a literal translation of the Italian title of his poem, but also a connection to the oral), he does so in a way that references both the print and the versification: “so art thou ornate that thy reasons / Shall be praised from thy understanders / With others hast thou no will to make company” (179). The slightly mocking addition of the non-word “understanders” and the overdone inversions of the lines create a joke about the poem’s exegetical challenges. The address to the song also aligns ornate oratory with fancy typography to produce a kind of tongue-in-cheek elevation for the epic’s performative “I speak.” This mock tribute (though mockery and imitation in the poem seem usually to have edges of seriousness) the art of rhetoric and oration hearkens back, too, to Canto XIII, in which Kung tries to decide which art to master in order to become famous: “perhaps I should take up charioteering, or archery? / Or the practice of public speaking?” (58).

The alignment of typography and oration is not the only instance in the text in which aural or auditory qualities are given material form. The physical form of speech is often metaphorized. In Canto VII, voices, as the tenors of the metaphors, are captured in various material vehicles. The repeated “rattle of old men’s voices,” and the location of “the old men’s voices, beneath the columns of false marble, / The modish and darkish walls” combines ephemeral and monumental imagery to suggest that speech might be materialized, and might leave almost ghostly traces in order to endure historically, just as printed texts do (24). The “Thin husks I had known as men, / Dry casques of departed locusts / speaking a shell of speech...” indicate an emptying out of the speech of history (26). The metaphor of a military helmet either full or once full, given the adjectival ambiguity of “departed,” also aligns with some of the later

images that link both oration and print with the material forms of military apparatus and weaponry. The transmission of language therefore has political potential, regardless of its form.

Although speeches and speech-making seem to often cross over with the act of writing, the *Cantos* also explore the conceptual frameworks opened up by different forms of printing. A deeply ambivalent attitude towards different kinds of print and towards different producers of textual forms emerges in the text, since no form, ephemeral or solid, comes out with an unchangeable description. Perhaps the most extreme examples of condemnation of form are of newspapers and political speeches in Canto XIV, in which politicians and journalists have their verbal productions aligned with scatological excretions as they are “addressing crowds through their arse-holes” and

howling, as of a hen-yard in a printing-house  
the clatter of presses  
the blowing of dry dust and stray paper  
foetor, sweat, the stench of stale oranges,  
dung, last cess-pool of the universe . . . (61)

The attention to the sounds of the machinery and to the chaotic and putrid atmosphere of mass print production aligns with the emptiness and destructiveness of political speeches to produce a kind of textual production that can be distinguished from art by the very atmosphere in which it is produced. While it appears that mechanisms of production are here simply vehicles to allow for despicable excretions, it is clear that the printing of newspapers (also derided elsewhere: “When public opinion is rightly informed, as now it is not / ... / newspapers govern the world” and “they will print anything that will sell” [LXXI 415, 419]) is of a different kind than the production of art books, illustrations, and of literature. Pound’s somewhat snobbish alignment of mass production with diminished quality of language reflects a distrust of the commercial nature of mass production.

Elsewhere in the *Cantos*, however, to “print” can be a desire, an investment, and an aspiration: “he wanted to start a press /and print the greek [sic] classics” (LXXIV 464). There remains a tension between portrayals of material production that trope dissemination of texts as a valuable and freeing quality and those that suggest that print technology actually obscures knowledge. It seems that one of Pound’s chief indictments was of partial texts, or texts limited in their revelation of the appropriate information to educate. In Canto XXXV, just such a use of print technology to obscure and hide rather than to produce meaning is articulated:

Nap III had the composition divided,  
to each compositor in the print shop  
a very few lines  
  
none seeing the whole Proclamation. (569)

The process of compositing is here an apt metaphor for the division of knowledge into uselessly small components, since each letter in the distribution of type is set separately, with each letterform placed upside-down and backwards in the compositing stick. The printed text is therefore, in the compositing process, divided into unintelligible units. Pound goes on in this section to describe what is missing from these partial perceptions of the world: “No classics, / no American history, / no centre, no general root” (LXXXV 569). In this sense, the deliberate limiting of attention to the smallest section or detail at the expense of the whole seems like falsity, and any use of print to this end (whether political or educational) is obscuring. Pound often contrasts his criticism of contemporary practices of print with more archaic forms, and the two instances described above of omitting “the classics” from the world of textual production lead Pound to return in his metaphors to technologies that dealt primarily with early texts of literary history and contributed to what Rainey describes as the poem’s “massively overdetermined effort to trace a cultural genealogy of the twentieth century, to locate in the recesses of public and private memory the resources for a utopian transformation of Western culture” (7). Latent in Rainey’s language is an indication that the “resources” of production

might be related to the printing and distribution of culture as much as to its literary side, and the transformations of printed technology were of great interest to Pound for his own book and within the poem (2).

One such archaic and idealized form crucial to this overarching history is the figure of intaglio printing in Pound's work, which has most often and most closely been associated with the precision and clarity of imagism.<sup>3</sup> The complexity of the process and the cultural resonances of the actual form have received less scholarly attention. What are now called the "Ur-Cantos" were originally published in Harriet Munroe's *Poetry* in 1915. Pound substantially revised them before including them in any other collections, and the bulk of these early drafts are absent from all subsequent editions. In the original text of the Ur-Cantos that was revised to begin, as Canto III, "Hang it all, Robert Browning," Pound claims that the poem will "Give up th'intaglio method," and it is generally assumed that with this statement he renounces his early imagist poems in favor of epic form (qtd. in Mao 163). Intaglio was associated with imagism because the process involves inking an entire etched surface (usually a copper, steel, or zinc plate) and then wiping away the excess ink until only what has collected in the incisions remains. The printing press (usually a roller) then applies pressure to the plate and to the dampened paper and transfers the ink from the grooves. The stripping bare of the plate to leave only the essential lines is what makes the metaphor work for sparse imagist poems. However, the historical development and progressively changing function of the form complicates the implications of the process. It was first used in 1430 in Germany; Pound was well aware of this fifteenth-century usage, and he often idealized early printing. Jerome McGann argues that Pound's nostalgia had mainly to do with the Renaissance, and that his appreciation of aesthetically pleasing print came through the Pre-Raphaelites (43). However, William Blake also used his own improvised version of the technique to produce his illustrated books, and intaglio proved a useful technique for early photogravure in the early twentieth century when it was often used for postage stamps and, crucially for one of Pound's obsessive concerns, bank notes (Leaf 10).



Intaglio recurs throughout the *Pisan Cantos* as a process worthy of careful and reiterated metaphorization, which complicates the straightforward equation of intaglio with imagism, particularly given his addition of a political element in this section to the discourse of print. However, the general cautions about reading too much of an author's own criticism and self-description earnestly into his work aside, it is clear that imagism and epic combine in *The Cantos* (there are any number of passages that could be selected to exemplify the imagist pockets of the poem, but perhaps this one makes the point: "if calm be after tempest / the ants seem to wobble / as the morning sun catches their shadows" [LXXX 533]). The excision of "Give up th'intaglio method" from the final version of Canto III might be a shift in attitude about the place of imagism within the work. The remaining three references to intaglio are all in the *Pisan Cantos*, and that these are some of the most insistently concerned with the material conditions of writing and with the nostalgic return to both an archaic form and to a previous poetic method in Pound's own life is not surprising. The simple fact of his imprisonment and the material constraints that came with it are not the only reasons why the *Pisan Cantos* deal the most closely with print. In Canto CXXIV, the near-mythic anecdote about "the man with an education / and whose moth was removed by his father / because he made too many *things*," aligns with the self-referencing section that explains and rails against his own imprisonment: "that free speech without free radio speech is as zero / and but one point needed for Stalin / you need not, i.e. need not take over the means of production." (447, 448). While he earlier distinguishes poetry from other media through the material qualities of language, which differ from the plastic, musical, and dramatic arts, the function of release and free utterance unite them. There are several instances elsewhere in which Pound associates language with freedom and the free press with the function of art: "poetry is identical to all other arts in its main purpose, that is, of liberation" ("The Wisdom of Poetry" 360). Freedom, however, can be curtailed or bounded by print, by radio, or by publishing practice even as these modes of transmission are necessary to bring it to its public. There is an unavoidable ethical problem, too, of the frequently hateful and

Fascist-infected nature of Pound's own discourses that render his idealization of free speech politically charged.

The figuration of Pound's own literal imprisonment makes his remarks on free speech and freedom of the press particularly resonant. Some critics have, however, questioned the truth of Pound's own descriptions of the authentic and immediate circumstances under which the *Pisan Cantos* were composed. While Pound claims that he wrote the whole sequence in those four months in prison and did not substantially revise them, Ronald Bush suggests that the manuscripts show extensive later emendations that "dramatize spontaneous epiphany" (169) and fabricate the immediacy of the material conditions of prison life. In spite of what the revisions in the manuscripts might show, according to a fellow inmate, Pound was, when he wrote or at least drafted the poems, in the position of refusing a typewriter for his "cage" since he worried that the dust and grime would ruin its mechanisms (Allen 34).

Pound's concern with the "root of the process" (LXXIV 457) and the value of the free press was intensified by his desire and incarcerated incapacity to be the "lord of his work and master of utterance / who turneth his word in its season and shapes it" (462). The proliferation of multitudinous texts in a variety of forms and the freedom to do so is here a kind of expansive gesture, which brings the natural elements in line with the freedom creative production: "rain also is of the process" and "wind also is of the process" (142). Canto LXXIV as a whole is deeply concerned with the sculptural processes of printing and production and their possible constraints. The production of text is immediately given a political significance:

... "victim,  
withstood them by the Thames and by Niger with pistol by Niger  
with a printing press by the Thames bank"  
until I end my song  
and shot himself;  
for praise of intaglios

Matteo and Pisanello out of Babylon

they are left us

for roll or plain impact

or cut square in the jade block. (457)

The seeming melodrama of suicide for an old form of printing suggests the pain of nostalgia for freedom. The shifting tenses and pronouns, from the past of the quotation to the enduring present of the bardic “until I end my song,” back to the past and indented (the effect of the white space makes the suicide almost parenthetical) “and shot himself / for praise of intaglios,” makes the link explicit between violence and print, but also between past and present. The continuation of the metaphors of impression in the “roll or plain impact / or cut square” (which echo three different kinds of printing presses for illustration: a platen which compresses flat iron into the image; an intaglio, which runs the paper beneath a large iron cylinder; and a cut square, which likely refers to stone or woodcut that could make an impression no matter what kind of pressure is applied). Each of these produces a strikingly different image, and the listing accumulation of different types of print is followed later by a more in depth exploration of intaglio, in particular, in Canto LXXIX:

The imprint of the intaglio depends

in part on what is pressed under it

the mould must hold what is poured into it (506)

The metrical organization and sound patterning of this section gives an aural, near-onomatopoeic impression, since the stressed syllables lie on the words that press the block into the paper in the mechanical process (the combination of the first three stressed syllables in the first line (“im” “t” “o”) even produce a distorted pun on “into”). The trochaic substitution after “pressed” also emphasizes the possible extension of this metaphor beyond printing – nowhere does the passage suggest that the etching is being pressed on paper, and the vague and internally rhyming line that finishes this small section suggests that the process of intaglio might be applied

to a liquid or even a human form. It seems possible to read the intaglio press as a prison as well as a producer of printed text or image, since the cages could be “moulds” “holding” the crimes “poured” into them. The ideograms that appear alongside these three lines can also be read in the method of visual ambiguity that can allow for perception of analogue that Pound suggests in his essay “The Ideogrammatic Method.” He describes his process of learning to read Chinese as not only understanding what the signs signify, but also learning what he can see in them as a kind of Wittgensteinian visual metaphor: “anyone can see how the ideogram for man or tree or sunrise developed or “was simplified from” or was reduced to the essentials of the first picture of man or tree or sunrise” (*ABC of Reading* 21). Pound went on to suggest that “a language written in this way HAD TO STAY POETIC; simply couldn’t help being and staying poetic in a way that a column of English type might very well not stay poetic” (21). There is a certain irony to the decoding of ideograms in the *Cantos*, though, since as Kenner points out, many of the symbols were printed upside-down. This occurred because “ideograms were photoengraved, like pictures, leaving a makeup man to insert a lead-faced wooden block onto a page, with no clue which way up it ought to go” (27). In the early printings, then, as now for non-Chinese readers of the poems, the ideograms were necessarily read visually, and not always with the direct link between meaning and character that Pound applauded.

Given Pound’s intense investment in the production of texts and of language as liberating gesture, he had a somewhat fraught relationship with the actual “means of production” as they engaged with his own text. The result of his prolific and often disorganized writing processes for the *Cantos* (“I picked out this thing and that thing that interested me and jumbled them into a bag”) has been a series of editors and critics who have attempted to limit and control the materials (qtd. in Furia 3). In his preface to a 1973 edition of his *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, Pound paid tribute to the work of the editor of the volume: “to tread delicately amid the scrapings of the cracker-barrel is no easy job and Mr. Cookson has made the best of it” (1). Pound was not always so kind to his editors and throughout his career was more apt to come back at his

publishers with an indignant “Gheez I orter see proofs!” (qtd. in Nadel 153) than with a recognition of the difficulty of editing his often haphazard material. His flippant advice to e.e.cummings: “I don’t think you wd / have difficulty in fuckin away to ye / cocks content, IN between book covers; and in de lookx editions,” (Nikolova 7) shows at once his attention to the conditions of printing and his irreverence for the deluxe edition so often associated with small-press modernisms. Despite his intense involvement in the publication of the deluxe edition of *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (1925) by William Bird at the Three Mountain Press, and despite elaborate ornaments and illustrations of Dorothy Pound for this initial volume, his attitude towards his own material texts could shift aggressively from total indifference to deep investment. Often it is easy to see how the decisions that Pound makes, including his frequent embrace of errors and of textual mutability (“one thing that is *not* wanted is uniformity in lots of places where a *variant* is in *intended*” [qtd. in Nadel 154]) in part produced the deeply complex situation that scholars would later have to explore in editing.

Any critical examination, whether textual or conceptual, is always partial. The level of thoroughness that’s possible is a contested debate in textual studies more broadly: while “pure” bibliographers like Fredson Bowers would argue that one can say everything, through descriptive bibliography, that can be said about a material text, others, from A. E. Housman onwards, have argued that textual studies has, or ought to have, a conceptual dimension that makes it necessarily incomplete. While the ideal of a textual scholar is often completeness, it seems essential to both “leave blanks,” like Pound’s ancient Chinese historians of Canto XII, and to appreciate the blanks that have been left in critical writing. Textual critics of the *Cantos*, in particular, have been unusually keen to point out the limitations of their own understandings. Hugh Kenner’s statement that when it comes to this epic “we’re all students always, there’s no finality” (24) expresses a sentiment that is latent in the many explanatory pre-amblés to critical works on the *Cantos* which focus the attention of scholarly work to a particular section, or element, or piece of archival material, or methodology, or even, in extreme cases, to the textual

variants of a single line. Barbara Eastman's similar statement that "the limitations of this examination of the *Cantos* as a historical document have been imposed by the impossibility of assembling and collating all the materials necessary for a complete evaluation of the text at this time" (34) and Lawrence Rainey's suggestion that his book "focuses on constraints and conditions, on the social and material sites that not only nurture, but also pose resistance to interpretive or creative activity" (*Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture* xi) indicate that this is both a case of defining a field and also of acknowledging the mess that the papers are in. Perhaps it is Pound's own indictment in Canto XIII of scholars "sitting on piles of stone books, / obscuring the texts with philology, / hiding them under their persons" (63) that has scholars rushing to admit and even appreciate the built-in limits of their own endeavors. While there is more criticism that deals with the connection between print and ontology in the *Cantos* than there is for the work of many other Modernists, Pound's own metaphors of material textuality and print in the making of his text and the texts around him enhance an understanding of the multitude of kinds of textual media that characterized modern production. Pound's frequent mention of print and textuality in the epic suggests that to analyze the typographical and material features that might otherwise be rendered transparent can offer a sense of how attention is captured and released by features of typography.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For ease of reference and in lieu of a scholarly standard or a suitable option offered by the MLA Style Guide, I will parenthetically cite quotations from the *Cantos* by using the format of (Canto Page) as above. All references are to the New Directions edition 1993 reprinting.

<sup>2</sup> See Kearns, Terrell, Hesse, and Dilligan, Parins and Bender, among others. Many of these critics, it is worth noting, have been immeasurably useful in my own reading of Pound.

<sup>3</sup> See Mao and Perloff.

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# Faulkner's Coffin

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines William Faulkner's use of the coffin form in his depression-era family epic, *As I Lay Dying*. I ask whether we can envision what Faulkner is doing with the aesthetic shape of the coffin—a form which he even typographically reproduces within the text itself—as a kind of strange realism. In order to make this argument, I recruit Frederic Jameson's recent discussion in *The Antinomies of Realism*, where he argues that the realist text is not a straightforward mimetic project, but rather involves a dialectical push-and-pull between a specific force and its exact opposite. Faulkner's lists perform a kind of metaphysical carpentry that asks us to consider the coffin not just as a textual trope or a symbol, but as a form that is itself constitutive of the way this story makes meaning.

## KEYWORDS

Realism, Faulkner, Jameson, Modernism, The Great Depression, Narrative, Literary Objects

Written on the cusp of America's Great Depression, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is populated with characters who live in a place that is irrevocably physical. Here, the heat of the summer sun and the dryness of the Southern landscape confront us with a tangible, earthly immediacy. Set in the Deep South (Mississippi to be exact, in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County), the text follows the Bundrens, a struggling farming family headed by the bullish and inconsiderate patriarch, Anse Bundren. This is a man who is, in the words of his late wife Addie, "a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame" (Faulkner 173). Addie Bundren serves as the narrative counterbalance to Anse: she is the heart of the novel, and her death in first chapter propels the family to trek across the state, rotting corpse and all, in a bid to fulfill her dying wish to be buried in Jefferson. Faulkner creates a narrative world that is consistently threatening to careen out of control; maintaining the balance between Anse's destructive selfishness and Addie's role as the familial connective tissue proves difficult for even the most careful of characters. In what follows, I focus on Faulkner's carpenter, Cash Bundren: the dutiful son who is obsessed with building his mother the perfect coffin "on a balance" and who tries so hard to please his father (165). In many ways, Cash is the novel's consistent casualty; whenever things tilt dangerously in one direction another, it is very often at his expense.

I argue that Faulkner stages two simultaneous scenes of carpentry, paralleling Cash's constant building with an adjacent narrative construction of his own. Through the use of a rotating list of character-focused narration, whereby each chapter is told from a different person's point of view, Faulkner performs a kind of textual carpentry, and constructs a perspectively six-sided textual object.<sup>1</sup> Much like Addie's coffin, this hexagonal narrative structure is meticulously crafted as we progress through each chapter, and yet it is also always in the process of being remade, and built again. My interest in the materiality of the coffin is both an attempt to take seriously Faulkner's attention to a particular kind of object and an engagement with literary theory's recent interest in the philosophical status of material things in the world.

No longer just the purview of Marxism or book history, literary scholarship's relationship to the material is rapidly shifting, with approaches such as Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology breaking new ground. From the highly influential special issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled "Things" in 2001, to Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*, Graham Harman's *Guerilla Metaphysics*, and Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects*, thinkers in many corners of the academy are now recognizing the importance of confronting what Bill Brown calls "cultural debris" (227). We are thus beginning to understand, as Allan Hepburn suggests, that "despite Kant's intimation that objects are inert except when they arouse reactions in a perceiver, objects initiate action and propel narrative; ... they generate stories" (10).

In calling these parallel coffins "objects," I am also attending to the text's obsession with an ekphrastic mode of storytelling that is inextricably dependent upon the constant invocation of an aesthetic object. In doing so, Faulkner's modernist text participates in the epic tradition of descriptively recruiting a textual object in order to help construct a narrative world. Ekphrasis, or "the verbal representation of a visual representation," has a long literary history, and Faulkner's use of this technique is akin to Homer's narrative invocation of The Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, as I discuss in more detail below (Mitchell 152). Like Homer, Faulkner uses the traditionally descriptive form of the list in order to achieve a kind of metaphysical carpentry: the in-text creation of a textual object that simultaneously instantiates and upholds the narrative world itself.

In creating a type of rotating narrative list—what Wai Chi Dimock calls "decentralized narration"—Faulkner thus engages in a storytelling process that is constantly under construction. The Bundrens' story is made and then remade chapter-by-chapter; reconstructed through each subsequent character's narrative perspective. The novel opens with three chapters that move through Addie's three sons—from Darl to Cash to Vardaman—to the fourth being told from the perspective of the family's wealthy neighbour Vernon Tull. Addie herself is given her own chapter after her death that tellingly appears at the very center of the novel. Many critics see in

her chapter an implicitly feminist attempt to undermine the narrative's patriarchal organization of power, as Addie is here quite literally speaking "from an impossible position."<sup>2</sup> Despite this moment, however, Addie's voice soon gets narratively over-written, as do all the voices in this story. *As I Lay Dying* is thus constantly in the process of being simultaneously built and destroyed, and each progressive movement is always met with a competing narrative force of equal measure.

To theoretically contextualize this claim, I turn to Frederic Jameson's recent study *The Antinomies of Realism*. As Jameson argues, the realist literary text is enacted through a dialectical process of competing antinomies. These oppositional forces, he argues, remain in tension instead of resolving into a Hegelian synthesis. He explains:

Realism [is] a historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined, and whose emergence and development at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution. The stronger it gets, the weaker it gets; winner loses; its success is its failure. And this is meant, not in the spirit of the life cycle . . . , or of evolution or of entropy or historical rises and falls: it is to be grasped as a paradox and an anomaly, and the thinking of it as a contradiction or an aporia. (7)

Given the critical tendency to generically dichotomize modernism and realism, it might seem counterintuitive to discuss Faulkner in relation to even an "antinomial" realist tradition. Jameson himself complicates this divide, however, when he writes that "the opposition between realism and modernism already implies a historical narrative which . . . is very difficult to reduce to a structural or stylistic one . . . and is also difficult to control" (2-3). This intuition is partly why he discusses modernists such as Faulkner in *Antinomies* and does not limit himself to more traditional nineteenth-century realist writers such as Tolstoy, Zola, or Eliot.

If we read Faulkner through Jameson, then, we can identify multiple examples throughout *As I Lay Dying* of two oppositional, antinomial forces that are acting at the very same time. When Addie dies, she is placed in her casket reversed and clothed in her wedding dress, creating a strange scene where expected cultural markers are uncomfortably replaced by their opposites. The Bundrens' entire journey is meant to be one long funeral procession for her, but when she is finally buried in the ground, we are surprised to learn of her immediate resurrection through Anse's replacement wife, as we "meet Mrs. Bundren" again (Faulkner 261). When Cash breaks his leg trying to save the coffin from falling into a creek, Anse pours concrete over it in a hasty and ill-conceived plan to create a makeshift cast. That cast, an object meant to slowly heal a break by immobilizing the limb, adheres to Cash's skin and slowly starts to decompose his leg, making matters much worse (224). With his novel that was born out of the death of American economic structures, Faulkner creates a textual object that successively inters its struggling inhabitants.

By calling Faulkner's narrative coffin/coffin narrative "realist," my intent is not to decide whether *As I Lay Dying* should be placed within the literary realist canon. Rather, I am interested in staging an interaction with Jameson's intriguing new formulation of realism in order to think of this novel as a realist modernist object. Jameson gives us a version of realism that is itself deeply conflicted and somewhat unrecognizable. His is a *strange* realism,<sup>3</sup> freed from its adhesion to strict generic categories and a mimetic investment in the "real;" a realism that functions not as a stable aesthetic category but as a "hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions" (Jameson 6). Because this realism is more productively elastic than most of its theoretical forbearers, it can begin to tell us more about the kinds of aesthetic intricacies we see operating in texts like Faulkner's. I therefore borrow Jameson's use of the antinomial structure not to better understand the generic category of realism per se, but to

theoretically expand the possibilities for understanding *As I Lay Dying's* idiosyncratic mode of storytelling.

Faulkner's narratological use of a rotating list constructs a textual object that is always in flux: always changing shape even as it is being built up, never quite succeeding in becoming the thing it is meant to be. This process is mirrored in Addie's coffin, which threatens to break or tip over, has holes bored in its top, and is constantly leaking smell, water, and even sound. From the opening sound of Cash's adze rhythmically hitting the wood out of which he is carving the coffin, to Dewey Dell's increasing level of desperation as she repeatedly attempts and fails to get an abortion, this text is constituted through very real, very physical experiences which these characters are asked to endure. Faulkner constructs his text out of what Jameson somewhat mysteriously calls "the heterogeneous materials that somehow end up coalescing into what we call the novel" (7).

Faulkner's rotating narrative is also worth considering within the larger history of the list itself as an aesthetic category, a topic about which scholars have recently become very interested. As Umberto Eco explains in *The Infinity of Lists*, lists are often discussed in relation to the history of literary representation and story telling. Homer's epics, then, provide a fairly solid historical place to start. Eco thus begins his book of lists with an identification of Homer's description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* as one of the first and greatest lists in the history of Western art:

The shield has so many scenes that, unless we consider infinitesimally minute goldsmithery, it is difficult to imagine the object in all its wealth of detail. . . . The shield could have more scenes than it could materially contain . . . . Aesthetics tells us that a form can be infinitely interpreted, new aspects and new relationships can be found every time. . . . Nevertheless, a figurative work of art . . . possesses a 'referential' function: a narrative told in words or images about the real or the imagined world. This is the narrative function of Achilles' shield. (11-12)

There are two main points I wish to underscore here. One is the irrevocable narrativity of the shield itself; despite the fact that we are encountering a great list that would seem to suspend the narrative world of the *Iliad*, we learn much about Homer's story from this textual object through its representation of the passing of time. The second point I would like to emphasize is the shield's apparent "referential function," a designation which works to place this most unreal fictional object in the realm of realism, or at least has it performing some important kind of narrative mimesis. While the shield is not easily reproducible in the "real" world, its form is inextricably tied to a "realist" representation of the intricacies which make up Homer's world.

Jameson also invokes Achilles' shield, but does so in order to provide an example of narrative's antinomy. Using Homer's literary object to explain a-narrativity, Jameson argues that the shield perfectly represents the thing that resists realism's inextricable attachment to temporality and plot. Instead of moving away from the theoretical field of aesthetics, he accounts for his argument aesthetically, suggesting that realism is a result of an ongoing and "irrevocable antagonism between . . . twinned forces" (11). According to Jameson, these antinomies in question are narrative; or the French "récit" for "the tale," which he prefers because of its association with the event of story-telling as such; and a-narrativity: what he will eventually call, somewhat reluctantly, "affect" (11).

This affective mechanism operating within realism is structurally and synecdochically related to what Jameson sees as the innate a-temporality of literary lists. When we encounter a list in literary representations such as Homer's shield, we encounter a form of what Jameson calls "scenic elaboration" (11). These representations work to momentarily halt the telling of the story but maintain their place within the narrative because they expand or elaborate the story's existing structure. This is, we will note, quite apart from what Eco argues above. "The most inveterate alternative to narrative as such," Jameson writes,



reminds us that storytelling is a temporal art, and always seems to single out a painterly moment in which the onward drive of narrative is checked if not suspended altogether.

The Shield of Achilles!: this is the most famous instance of that suspension of narrative.

Will the ancient rhetorical trope of ekphrasis be sufficient to fold this descriptive impulse back into narrative homogeneity? (8)

According to Eco, it might just well. While Homer's description of the shield is, of course, one of the earliest examples of ekphrasis—it is primarily a literary representation of a static, physical piece of art—it simultaneously functions as a crucial piece of the *Iliad's* narrative structure.

The shield recounts not just the particulars of Homer's world but also includes events and circumstances that have happened in the past or are happening in the present. The same characters are re-encountered, their circumstances changed, and their situations shifted. So as much as the shield represents a moment of a-narrativity (the larger narrative of the story is, for a moment, put on hold), it simultaneously functions as a representational constituent of that same narrative world. While it may hold the linear plot temporarily hostage, it is a piece of narrative scaffolding that both includes its own type of storytelling and upholds the rest of Homer's constructed environment.

We can also draw a historical parallel between the fictional shield and another ekphrastic textual object: the historical "coffin texts" of the Middle Kingdom period in Egypt. Also called "mortuary texts" or "funerary texts," these coffins served a dual function: to bury the dead and maintain cultural history and practices by writing them down (Nyord 2). Many of these coffins were covered in hieroglyphs that depicted carefully chosen spells that were used for various cultural functions. In this way, the coffins both reflected and constituted the social world out of which they were born, and their decipherment remains a popular subject of study for Egyptologists today. Regularly decorated with spells meant to help the person who had died reach the afterworld with ease, these coffin texts wrote the process of death and dying while

playing a central role in the physical performance of burial rituals. I would thus like to position Faulkner's coffin as a modernist "coffin text;" as a physical object that both reveals the underlying narrative structure of the text and upon which is written the novel's central thematic concerns with death, creation, and perspectival balance.

So central is this object to *As I Lay Dying* that Faulkner typographically inserts an image of its physical shape and interrupts the text of Vernon Tull's chapter (88). It is almost as if the entire narrative is written on the coffin's form. From the earliest moments of the novel, we are introduced to this object through ekphrasis, but there is a very important difference between Homer and Faulkner. We first encounter Achilles' shield in its finished form, but when we first glimpse the coffin, it is still in the process of being created. We enter the text from the perspective of Darl, the Bundren who no one quite understands; who suffers from mental illness and exits the book laughing quizzically and being taken away by doctors. Already here, as Faulkner starts to build the first side of his hexagonal family narrative, we are gathering information somewhat indirectly and from a multitude of sources. As Darl passes by his brother Cash, he hears the sound of the adze. We understand that something is being built, but we don't yet know exactly what it is:

I . . . mount the path, beginning to hear Cash's saw. When I reach the top he has quit sawing. Standing in a litter of chips, he is fitting two of the boards together. Between the shadow spaces they are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade: a good carpenter, Cash is. . . . Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort. I go on to the house, followed by the

Chuck.                      Chuck.                      Chuck.  
of the adze. (5)

We hear the coffin come into the narrative through the sound of Cash's saw; Darl's description emphasizes the process of building, but also the aesthetic nature of the thing that is being built. The boards with which Cash is working are "yellow as gold, like soft gold," and there is an attention here not just to Cash's ability, but also his carefulness and devotion to a particular type of craftsmanship (4). Later in the text, Darl describes Cash beveling the edge of the coffin "with the tedious and minute care of a jeweler" (79). Cash is a builder/artist, creating the prized object around which this narrative will spin: the thing that will maintain its jeweled shimmer even after it falls into a muddy creek, its planks "still yellow, like gold seen through water" (157).

Jewel's version of this same scene is somewhat different. His description of Cash's carpentry is tinged with annoyance and a desperate frustration over the inevitability of his mother's impending death:

Because I said If you wouldn't keep on sawing and nailing at it until a man cant sleep even and her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn't get them clean. . . . I said if you'd just let her alone. . . . That goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less. One lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is. (15)

Here, instead of the more productive and slower "Chuck. Chuck." of the adze that we experience through Darl's perspective, Jewel's ominous and lyrical "One lick less" is somehow much more narratively inflected. It is as though the adze is counting out the days, the hours, or breaths that Addie Bundren has left. Each stroke seems to bring everyone closer to the tragedy they know is about to befall them (which is also the reality of being left alone with Anse at the helm). Cash's carpentry is no longer generative in Jewel's chapter; it contributes to the slow decline of the only thing holding him to the earth. That Jewel is also Addie's "illegitimate"<sup>4</sup> son—the one who she "always whipped [and] petted more" than the rest—might account for this shift in tone and perspective from one son to the other (18).

In the above passage, Jewel likens his mother's body to tree or plant that has been uprooted and can never quite be washed clean. Later in the text, Addie echoes this moment when she admits that at times "I would hate my father for having ever *planted* me" (170, emphasis added). If Addie is here thinking of herself as a tree, then this is one example of many throughout the text where a character is figured as somehow composed of wood. Darl sees Cash "staring straight ahead" while working on the coffin, "his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face," and later notes that Jewel's eyes also "look like pale wood in his high-blooded face" (4, 17). Though it is most often Darl making these observations, this pattern cuts across narrative voices, as Tull describes Anse as "spindling," his eyes "like pieces of burnt-out cinder fixed in his face, looking out over the land" (32). Dewey Dell, drowning in her own desperation and longing to turn the wagon and head for New Hope, describes Jewel sitting on his horse "like they were both made out of wood, looking straight ahead" (122). Later, after Cash is badly injured in the creek accident, Darl describes an unsympathetic Anse looming "tall above us as we squat; he looks like a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist" (163). Darl thinks about Armstid: "He had that wooden look on his face again; that bold, surly, high-colored rigid look like his face and eyes were two colors of wood, the wrong one pale and the wrong one dark" (181). Near the end of the text, just as the group narrowly avoids a violent run-in with some locals, Darl sees Anse "squatting, staring straight ahead, motionless, lean, wooden-backed, as though carved squatting out of lean wood" (231).

Is it because so many of Faulkner's characters are wooden that the fire Darl sets in Gillespie's barn is so affectively heavy with a potential for catastrophe? Faulkner takes such care in crafting this scene, and the narrative moves slowly even as the flames quickly engulf the building, threatening every life (and dead body) within it. There is an almost surreal quality to this scene, as Addie's coffin resting on two sawhorses turns into a "cubistic bug," the hallway "looks like a searchlight turned to rain," Jewel morphs into "that figure cut from tin" and, in his

struggle with Gillespie, becomes “one of two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare” (219, 221). The chapter ends with a striking image, as “Mack leaps forward into a thin smell of scorching meat and slaps at the widening crimson-edged holes that bloom like flowers in his undershirt” (222). A fire that blooms into flowers as it destroys: this is one example among many of Faulkner using something like Jamesonian antinomies to continually shape and reshape his text. Like Cash’s constant sawing, there is a simultaneous push-and-pull of opposing forces that moves this book along, like Addie’s father’s pronouncement that “the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time” (169). Darl describes the sounds of Cash’s incessant carpentry as “ceasing without departing,” “a thin thread of fire running along the edge of the saw, lost and recovered at the top and bottom of each stroke in unbroken elongation:” “one lick,” but then always, also, “less” (76).

Famously, Faulkner claimed to have written this novel in a short six weeks while working night shifts in a coal plant. In a 1931 interview with Marshall J. Smith, Faulkner describes how he composed the novel while listening to the constant sound of the dynamo in the plant. It is useful to contextualize this novel that begins with the sound of the rhythmic movements of Cash’s carpentry as having been written to the beat of a similarly relentless sound. How fitting, too, that a depression-era novel was composed against the backdrop of the proletariat sounds of an industrial coal plant. In many ways Faulkner is akin to Cash; an artist-builder or literary carpenter, carefully fashioning and refashioning the story of these fragile wooden characters, always risking a catastrophic descent into fire, laboring to build his own narrative coffin (we are always here moving towards a burial) through their many-angled eyes. Crafting his own Shield of Achilles through multiple voices, Faulkner presents a story so perspectively layered that it, like the shield’s contents, somehow exceeds the page upon which it is written.

Benjamin Widiss picks up on this notion of Faulknerian excess in his article “Fit and Surfeit in *As I Lay Dying*.” Through a detailed close reading of the text supported by a focus on

linguistic “surfeit” and lexical play, Widiss argues that Faulkner stages a dialectic between a type of textual realism and a much more multiple and narratively unpredictable epistemological landscape. He writes:

*As I Lay Dying's* particular accomplishment lies in this dialectic it constructs by way of its surfeit, the dynamic engagement it fosters between two understandings of textual surface: the referential, identificatory experience we share with the characters, and the cross-referential, linguistic experience we share with the author. . . . Faulkner does not simply hold the aesthetic in opposition to a more constrained sense of the mimetic; rather, each informs and ultimately re-forms the other, making the novel not merely a step forward in the long trajectory from mimetic realism into modernist and postmodernist aesthetics of textual play, but also a highly self-conscious, productively oscillatory performance of and commentary on that transition. (103-4)

Widiss and I agree on the twinned planes that seem to be operating in Faulkner's novel: there is a phenomenological reality that the characters experience—a physical, mimetic world where mothers die and little boys are heartbroken—and there is another world in which the author and reader are engaging in a conversational, and at times philosophical exchange about that first world. This second place, according to Widiss, is where words have room to mean different things and carry multiple referential capabilities. Widiss' clever play on Faulkner's fondness for the words “see” and “saw,” for example, allows him to make an aesthetically supported argument that the narrative is constantly oscillating, or “seesawing,” between different points of view. “The thematic of seesawing,” he suggests, “describes . . . a larger logic of offsetting, whereby the fate or value of one object or individual stands in inverse relation to that of another” (108). Widiss sees the novel as a whole residing within the process of constant exchange between events and the multiple meanings their narrative description occasions. What he identifies as an aesthetic flicker between realism and postmodernism, however, I would define

instead as strangely realist, since it is out of precisely this kind of oppositional structure, as Jameson reminds us, that realism itself is so often composed.

As is well-documented, Faulkner lifted his title directly from another of Homer's texts, *The Odyssey*, when Agamemnon, Achilles' rival, describes his own death: "As I lay dying the woman with the dog's eyes would not let my eyes close as I descended into Hades" (qtd. in Dimock). The image of one's eyes being held open while dying is certainly unsettling, especially if one is descending into hell. There are points throughout Faulkner's text when Addie's eyes, which can see and look even beyond her death, are dwelled upon more than once. Early on, Jewel sees Cash sawing away and thinks "she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you" (14). Vardaman, the youngest of the Bundrens, is the most concerned with this question. Unable to fully incorporate the reality of his mother's death, he bores holes in the top of the coffin to prevent her view from being completely obscured. He is often extremely anxious about how Addie is experiencing her dead body's journey, and wonders what she is feeling, hearing, and seeing throughout. He says to Darl:

"She's turned over," I say. "She's looking at me through the wood."

"Yes," Darl says.

"How can she see through the wood, Darl?"

"Come," Darl says. "We must let her be quiet. Come."

"She cant see out there, because the holes are in the top," I say. "How can she see, Darl?"

"Let's go see about Cash," Darl says. (215)

When Vardaman lovingly bores the holes into the top of the coffin (and, inadvertently, right into Addie's face), he is also undertaking his own act of carpentry, effectively impinging upon Cash's previously singular role as the text's builder and creator.

The obsessive perfectionist, however, says and does very little about this. This is somewhat unexpected, not only because of Cash's great investment in and control over the coffin's completion, but also because, as we learn later, he has a significant emotional attachment to his tools. Vardaman is found "asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in the last one" (73). Certainly the holes would upset the balance of his creation, but Cash neither chastises his brother for the trespass, nor does he appear to be upset by the damage. Eventually, though, he does get to work meticulously repairing the coffin, and a new act of creation results. He approaches this new project with all the careful attention to detail to which we have become accustomed. Vernon Tull observes: "Cash is filling up the holes he bored in the top of it. He is trimming out plugs for them, one at a time, the wood wet and hard to work. . . . I have seen him spend a hour trimming out a wedge like it was glass he was working, when he could have reached around and picked up a dozen sticks and drove them into the joint and made it do" (87). In a sense, Vardaman and Cash are now co-creators of Addie's coffin, and this is very similar to the way in which the larger narrative moves: Faulkner crafts a scene only to shift and change its shape by recreating that same moment through the eyes of a different character. It is this process of constant creation and revision that marks this text's peculiar narrative form. The rotating list of character perspectives creates a textual object that is always in transition, and never quite complete.

It is directly following this incident with the auger that we encounter the most explicit list in the text: a chapter told from Cash's perspective that is made up entirely of a numbered catalog. Composed of thirteen neatly ordered items, this chapter moves from what at first appears as a fairly straightforward and mathematical account of his carpentry work to more overtly philosophical and enigmatic musings. I quote it in full below:

I made it on a bevel.



1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up and down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
8. Animal magnetism
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down in the bevel.
11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.
12. So I made it on the bevel.
13. It makes a neater job. (82-3)

Eco would likely call this a poetic list in the guise of a practical list, as its logical progression of numbers somehow belies the epistemological inaccessibility of its contents. The sixth item on Cash's list functions as joint or a hinge:<sup>5</sup> it turns the list around on itself, and the "except" effectively undermines everything that has preceded it. In some ways, this list functions similarly to Jorge Luis Borges' "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge," which Eco spends some time dissecting, and an analysis of which Foucault famously opens *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*.

Because Borges' list paradoxically itemizes itself by including animals that are "included in this classification" as one of its constituents, it effectively creates an endless referential loop, or tautology. The list is, in other words, composed of the things of which the list is composed. Eco identifies this as the moment at which the list evolves into what he calls a "non-normal set," because a normal set, in mathematical or taxonomic terms, will never include itself (*Infinity* 396). As Eco explains, however, Borges' list ultimately complicates this definition:

Let us establish that a set is normal when it does not include itself. The set of all cats is not a cat, but a concept. . . . The concept of a cat . . . brings together all the . . . real cats that exist or that never existed or will exist. But there are also sets (called non-normal) that are elements of themselves. For example the set of all concepts is a concept and the set of all infinite sets is an infinite set. A note on the set of all normal sets: If it were a normal set, . . . we would have an incomplete set, because it does not classify itself. If it were a non-normal set, . . . we would have an illogical set, because among all the normal sets we would have classified a non-normal set as well resulting in a paradox. All Borges did was play with this paradox. (396)

This passage has much to say about Faulkner's use of listing in Cash's chapter. The "except" almost acts as an antinomy of Borges' "those that are included," as it performs the exact opposite referential movement: the sixth item here threatens the ontological stability of items one through five, thereby opening Cash's list up to an increasing level of abstraction. We might, therefore, classify Faulkner's list as a type of non-normal set, simply because it includes itself as an item but does so through a moment of negation. Instead of adding an item to the list, which a normal set would surely do, number six essentially performs a subtraction and amounts to a de-itemization of everything that has come before it.

In this moment both Cash's and Faulkner's woodworking converge, resulting in a kind of metaphysical carpentry that registers at the narrative *and* metanarrative level. While the list is

referentially anchored in Cash's careful explanation of his construction, it is also semantically establishing and then refashioning itself mid-way through, simultaneously affecting both the aesthetic form of the novel and the physical coffin itself. Despite the list's mysterious turn towards something called "animal magnetism," (about which critics have had no shortage of differing opinions in their attempt to decipher), Cash ends on a note that stresses the importance of aesthetics. Even though there is obviously great concern here for the longevity of the coffin—its ability to keep water out and his mother's body in—in the end, he suggests that he made the coffin on a bevel simply because "it makes a neater job." Cash, the text's artist/builder, wants to create not just a functional object, but a beautiful one as well.

It makes sense, then, that Faulkner would mark this character by creating a list that toggles between practicality and poeticism, never fully settling in either court. As Eco reminds us, the line between practical and poetic lists is often ambiguous at best, and can at times only be determined by the intent we assign to its author. "A restaurant menu," he writes,

is a practical list. But in a book on culinary matters, a list of the diverse menus of the most renowned restaurants would already acquire a poetic value. . . . The possibility of reading a practical list as a poetic one or vice-versa also occurs in literature. See the gigantic portrayal of the Convention made by Hugo in *Ninety-Three*. He wanted to represent the titanic dimensions (in an ideal and moral sense) of the Revolution through the physical proportions of its assembly. It is conceivable that what takes up page after page may serve the function of a practical list, yet no one can fail to see the effect of incompleteness it creates, as if it were the representation, through the abridged example of those few hundreds of names, of the immense tide that was sweeping over France in that fateful year. (374)

It is this same connection between the sweeping aesthetics of Hugo's text and his revolutionary subject matter that I want to draw between Faulkner's experimentation with listing and Cash's

carefully constructed coffin. It is as if the shifting narrative perspectives each slowly build their own side of the story; Cash here inaugurates a complicated layering that both justifies his obsessive building and gestures towards other, less easily decipherable motivations.

Because of his act of co-creation with the auger, Vardaman has in some ways become Cash's newly appointed apprentice. He follows this mysterious chapter with a phrase that could be read as an attempt to continue Cash's list because of its similarly aphoristic tone, yet it is not numbered and contains only a single phrase. In what is surely one of literature's strangest moments, Vardaman makes a puzzling statement that leaves the reader with few interpretative cues: "My mother is a fish" (84). It is as if he takes hold of the narrative power which Faulkner has bequeathed to him and halts the numbered linearity of Cash's discourse by hauling us back to an earlier textual moment: to the fish he killed and refused to clean. Addie's death undoes Vardaman in some important way, and he repeatedly clings to the image of the fish in a frantic attempt to make sense of her passing. When he realizes she has died, he thinks "I can feel where the fish was in the dust. It is cut up into pieces of not-fish now, not-blood on my hands and overalls. Then it wasn't so. It hadn't happened then. And now she is getting so far ahead I cannot catch her" (53). It is unclear, however, whether his alignment with Addie and the fish offers him any real solace, and Vardaman has, with one sentence, moved us away from Cash's attempt at ordered reasoning into an uncertain realm marked by emotional turmoil.

In his article "A Good Carpenter: Cash Bundren's Quest for Balance and Authority," Jason S. Todd argues that Cash, whom many critics relegate to the text's margins, is a centrally important character in the novel. Cash's obsession with balance, Todd suggests, is rooted in a desire to recalibrate the family dynamic and restore the patriarchal authority of his father, which Addie has so effectively undermined. "Throughout the first twenty chapters," Todd notes,

every character at least mentions the symphony of sounds made by Cash as he builds the coffin. . . . Cash's perfectionism with his carpentry work seems to overwhelm the

views many of the characters have of him, forcing them to see him only as 'a good carpenter,' as do many critics and readers of the novel. . . . I believe the coffin actually represents Cash's opposition to his mother and his loyalty to his father. . . . The perfectionism Cash applies to his construction of the coffin shows his desire to bury his mother permanently rather than respectfully. Cash wants to right the wrongs of his mother because she has taken away Anse's authority. (52, 55)

While this is an intriguing possibility—that the perfect coffin represents a potential end to Addie's disruption of the familial balance Cash so desperately wants righted—I remain partially unconvinced by Todd's claim. My hesitation is twofold: first, the claim does not account for Cash's clear commitment to aesthetic perfection I discussed above. If his only concern is to ensure that Addie's coffin is functional, why does Cash care about whether it is "neat" as well? What is the potential relationship here between his desire to bury her well and his desire to bury her neatly? Additionally, it seems entirely likely that Cash is so focused on attaining his father's approval because of Anse's continually abusive and neglectful behavior. Placing the blame with Addie for upsetting what was already a painfully unbalanced family to begin with seems to skirt the Bundrens' main problem: a harmful patriarchal family order that plays out against the terrible and inescapable backdrop of abject poverty.

I have throughout this essay attempted to use Jameson's notion of a realism that erupts from an irresolvable dialectic to describe how I see Faulkner's lists performing a peculiar type of narrative construction. In doing so, I have described a process that is something like what philosopher Graham Harman calls a "carpentry of things," which "speaks of . . . not the physical but the *metaphysical* way in which objects are joined or pieced together, as well as their internal composition of their individual parts" (2). In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman, who is writing from the perspective of an Object-Oriented Ontologist, argues that the continental philosophy of recent decades has fetishized the primacy of language and writing at the expense of an encounter

with “the lascivious warmth of the sun and air and the mystery of strange flashes at midnight” (2). Just as these kinds of posthumanist, new materialist trends in philosophy are reconsidering humanity’s relationship to the world in the wake of things like climate change and species extinction, literary criticism is similarly rethinking art’s relationship to the external world through its categories of mimesis, realism, and ekphrasis. Harman challenges us to “adjust our postures to the resonance of bird calls and acoustic guitars; . . . enjoy bread or raspberries, and respond to the demands of orphans” (2). As Widiss reminds us, *As I Lay Dying* is a book populated with motherless characters, an aspect which is textually “mirrored by the[ir] discontinuous ‘orphaned’ monologues” (100). In my attempt to attend to this text’s narrative and aesthetic particularities, then, I hope I have succeeded in hearing their demands a little more clearly.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are more sides, of course, if you count the non-Bundren characters, such as Cora Tull or Samson. For the purposes of my discussion, however, I’ll be focusing on the family unit itself, since it is primarily the dynamic between the Bundrens in which Faulkner’s narrative is so deeply invested.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted here to Peter Coviello for this insight.

<sup>3</sup> This “strange realism” shares an affinity with Object-Oriented Ontology’s interest in a “weird” or “speculative” realism, categories developed by thinkers such as Graham Harman and Levi Bryant that refer to a representation of the world that retains an important sense of mystery or epistemological inaccessibility. These thinkers favour writers such as H.P. Lovecraft for this reason.

<sup>4</sup> I use this word in quotation marks in an attempt to resist its pejorative cultural function.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Catherine Schwartz for the idea of the textual “hinge” I employ here.

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# Darkening the Dream: The Fantasy of History and Reality of Difference in Libba Bray's *The Diviners*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay addresses how Libba Bray's 2012 children's and young adult historical fantasy novel, *The Diviners*, represents an alternative literary articulation of US history in the modernist period that links difference to the material contexts of American history and society. I explore how historical fantasy allows Bray to connect the imaginative possibilities of the speculative genres to a critique of practices of exclusion in the US. Through an analysis of how Bray represents diverse characters in America in the 1920s, I argue that the novel reflects the ways in which the inter-war years shaped the racial and ethnic paradigms that would define a great deal of twentieth-century America. I focus in particular on the novel's engagement with the Harlem Renaissance, nativism, and immigration restriction. In trespassing the borders and boundaries of genre, history, identity and reality, *The Diviners* harnesses the potential of the speculative genres to imagine alternatively.

## **KEYWORDS**

YA Literature, The Jazz Age, Race & Ethnicity, Historical Fantasy, the Harlem Renaissance, American History, Contemporary American Literature, US Immigration

In a recent *New York Times Book Review*, the American award-winning children's author Alexander Kwame identifies "a seismic shift of tolerance and understanding happening in our country in general, and in children's literature in particular. Authors are calling on publishers to introduce more diverse books and writers into the marketplace, with themes and characters that truly reflect and represent the variegated world we live in" (*NY Times*, 26 Aug 2016). Kwame's comments address the historical lack of diverse authors and books with diverse characters in Children's and Young Adult (YA) literature.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in 2013, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) estimated that only ten percent of books published were by or about people of color (Fichtelberg xv). Responses to the study, such as the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Twitter campaign and websites such as Diversity in YA have helped to raise awareness about books by or about non-white people in Children's and YA literature.

Libba Bray is one of the YA authors to receive several nods from Diversity in YA (a digital organization dedicated to promoting diversity within YA literature), particularly for her most recent historical fantasy trilogy set in New York City in 1926.<sup>2</sup> The trilogy's first book, *The Diviners* (2012), features a diverse cast of characters negotiating the shifting social terrains of the Jazz Age in the US. The novel's social-historical setting provides a rich context from which to re-vision US history while connecting past to present. From the liminal spaces of YA literature, and working at the intersection of historical fiction and fantasy, Bray's novel represents an alternative literary articulation of US history in the modernist period that links difference to the material contexts of history and society. The novel depicts the American inter-war period as racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse, when an awareness of social class and class-based struggles also shaped public and private discourse. With a nuanced understanding of the importance of *difference* during this historical moment, the novel reflects the ways in which the inter-war years shaped the racial and ethnic paradigms that would define a great deal of twentieth-century America. Indeed, fractious discussion over immigration, race, borders, segregation, population control, and social

class stood at the forefront of political debates in this period, while gender and sexual norms experienced rapid changes. In looking back to the 1920s as a crucial moment in the US's social past, *The Diviners* simultaneously looks forward to a future of greater equality, inclusion, and diversity.

Fusing alternative politics with an alternative vision of the universe where the borders between the real and supernatural are permeable, the novel challenges notions of linear time and accepted reality. The familiar "escape from reality" that the speculative fiction offer readers is, of course, one of its deepest pleasures and sites of potential. In writing of race and historical fantasy in contemporary American ethnic novels, Ramon Saldívar draws on Jaqueline Rose's influential *States of Fantasy* to propose: "Fantasy in this sense links desire and imagination, utopia and history, but with a more pronounced edge intended to redeem, or perhaps even create, a new moral and social order" (Saldívar 587). Following Rose and Saldívar, I am concerned here with the radical potential of the speculative fiction in YA literature to enable social change through diversity and inclusivity. In this essay, I explore how historical fantasy allows Bray to connect the imaginative potential of the speculative genres to a critique of practices of exclusion in the US across time and space. Such a critique rejects the assimilationist myth of the multicultural "melting pot" and refuses to participate in a supposed post-racial America, theoretically achieved through the victories of the Civil Rights Movement(s) and the 2008 election of Barack Obama to President. In wake of the recent American presidential elections and rising tides of new-old nativism in the twenty-first century, it's now more important than ever to look back to the modernist movement as a formative time in history whose effects we are clearly still living. In illustrating a crucial moment in America's modernist past, Bray trespasses the borders and boundaries of genre, history, identity and reality in *The Diviners*, harnessing the potential of the speculative genres, specifically historical fantasy, to imagine alternatively.

As the ghost of Naughty John wreaks havoc on New York City in the 1920s, Bray reminds us that we, too, are still haunted by history. The novel posits that the darker sides of the

American Dream create a type of negative energy that awakens and nurtures nefarious supernatural powers. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison argues that the practice of transferring “internal conflicts to a ‘blank darkness’” by white artists, which “conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies,” represents a major theme in American literature (Morrison 38). In Morrison’s study of American literature, “the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona” (38-39). Thus, themes of evil and darkness have often been codes for the suppression of the racial other or ways of enacting a literary racial violence. In Bray’s novel, however, racial others are not suppressed and issues of race and difference are addressed openly throughout the text. The novel doesn’t engage “darkness” as allegory for non-white bodies who pose unspoken threats to (white) US identity, in the way that Morrison has suggested. The “darkness” haunting *The Diviners’* America refers precisely to many of the things Morrison argued American literature has historically suppressed—the nation’s nightmarish history of racism, exclusion, and violence, which becomes a tangible force of evil embodied in the novel’s villains. In “darkening” the American Dream, Bray’s novel addresses the failures of the US to live up to its lofty promises of a universal, liberal democracy with equality under the law for all. Instead of “out of many, one,” *The Diviners* posits that out of the many diverse groups inhabiting America’s cultural and physical landscapes, our failure to see and understand each other as humans has created an evil divisiveness. As the novel’s diverse characters are eventually united in the fight against these forces of evil, Bray offers a vision of solidarity where inclusion occurs as the result of shared struggle.

As a historical fiction novel with elements of the supernatural, written for young adults and featuring characters in their late teens, *The Diviners* falls in-between generic categories. However, slippage between genres is hardly uncommon in YA literature. Scot Smith notes, “Young Adult literature has a long tradition of authors whose works defy genre classifications” (Smith “The Death of Genre”). Smith identifies a recent resurgence of YA literature that he

describes as “innovative” and “bending traditional definitions of genre.” Within the YA scene, such genre-crossing stories are frequently referred to as “mash-ups.” According to Rabey: “A mash-up, first used to describe the combination of two or more songs, now refers to any joining of previously separate items, creating a new format or genre. Set in a historical New York City that is simultaneously real and unreal, Bray’s characters move through social and psychological landscapes that are both historically accurate and constantly disturbed by the supernatural.<sup>3</sup> Most of the central characters have special (paranormal) abilities: mind reading, dream walking, healing, the ability to start fire through touch, etc. These superhuman “diviners” are up against ghosts, evil spirits returned from the dead, and the usual master of darkness, whose exact nature and intentions has yet to be fully revealed. In this sense, *The Diviners* falls most definitely within the fantasy genre. Rabey argues that fantasy is one of the most popular sub-genres of YA literature and thus “mash-ups that combine historical fiction with fantasy are perhaps the most popular kind of mash-up.”

What the YA scene calls “mash-up,” Ramón Saldívar, in his work on contemporary ethnic novels, has called “historical fantasy” and “speculative realism.” These, Saldívar argues, emerge out of the urgent need for contemporary writers of color in the US to “to invent a new ‘imaginary’ for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction” (Saldívar 574). In the twenty-first century, “the relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, and, indeed, race and history” require an alternate imaginary in the form of genre-crossing novels inspired by fantasy, sci-fi, and popular and sub-culture(s). Specifically, historical fantasy links “fantasy, history, and the imaginary in the mode of speculative realism in order to remain true to ethnic literature’s utopian allegiance to social justice” (585). Saldívar roots historical fantasy and speculative realism in the material realities of racialization in the US that are particular to writers of color. Authors such as Salvador Plascencia and Junot Díaz, he writes, use historical fantasy and speculative realism to demonstrate “the ways that life experiences, such as migration, diaspora, and the history of economic, social, and legal injustice in the Americas are

represented in fiction as it addresses the enigma of race in contemporary America” (575). While the personal, lived experience of exclusion in the US undoubtedly shapes the writing of many writers of color, they are not the only writers to explore “the enigma of race” using genre-crossing modes that are motivated by alternative political visions. Bray, who identifies as a white woman, similarly foregrounds issues of difference in her historical fantasy, yet avoids lapsing into bland multiculturalism, tokenism, or cultural appropriation.

The question of diversity in the speculative genres and in YA is not insignificant. The genres have been critiqued for a lack of diversity, both in terms of who writes books and what kinds of characters they write about. As Helen Young notes, “Whiteness as a default setting is as much a feature of the Fantasy genre as it is of western culture and society” (Young 1). In *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, she argues: “The spaces of genre-culture—whether physical, digital, or imagined—have acquired the shape of the White bodies that have habitually occupied them for decades” (11). The same has been true for YA literature. As I noted earlier, there have been several successful campaigns to address the lack of diverse writers and books in the YA genres. Diversity in YA claims that “Diverse = Set in a non-Western world or inspired by a non-Western world; or with a main character who is non-white, LGBTQ+, and/or disabled.” Using this working definition, Malinda Lo, one of the website’s creators, undertook a serious study of diversity within the books chosen by the Young Adult Library Services’ “Best Fiction for Young Adults” list, released every January and including approximately 100 titles. In her study, Lo examined the BFYA lists from 2011, 2012, 2013. While the results of her study are available in their entirety on the Diversity in YA website, in general, Lo found a depressing lack of diversity across these lists. For example, in 2013, only 7.8% of the selected books were written by authors of color. In 2013, 21.9% of the books selected included non-white characters or characters of unspecified race. 23 titles had main characters of color and 15 of those 23 titles were written by white authors. 4.9% of the books on the 2013 list had LGBTQ+ characters. These brief examples clearly indicate a need for greater diversity within in the genre.

Yet both fantasy and YA literature have the potential to embrace diversity. Fantasy links politics to the inner desire to imagine differently and alternatively a world or worlds more just than ours. In *States of Fantasy*, Rose “proposes that ‘there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasy into the frame’” (qtd. in Saldívar 585). Or as Saldívar writes: “fantasy compels our attention to the gap or deficit between the ideal of redemptive liberal democratic national histories concerning inclusiveness, equality, justice, universal rights, freedom guaranteed by rule of law, and the deeds that have constituted nations and their histories as public collective fantasies” (594). In *The Diviners*, Bray writes from that very gap between the dizzy, lofty aspirations of nationhood circulating through the US in the 1920s, and the real struggles and exclusions that constitute history. The novel exposes official US history for what it is—a collective fantasy of inclusion, justice, freedom, democracy, and equality under law. Beneath the “new music” of the Jazz Age that “thrills” and “echo[s] the jagged excitement of the city’s skyline,” the novel’s opening pages depict a “country of dreams and soap ads, old horrors and bloodshed” where “some of those starry-eyed dreams have died and yet other dreams are being born into squalor and poverty, an uphill climb” (Bray 7-8). The all-knowing wind, whose omniscient narrative eye opens the novel, sweeps across the city surveying “a time of celebrity, of fame and fortune and grasping” unfolding in different ways in the tenements, ghettos, barrios, Uptown and Downtown, all across New York City. This wind knows America. It has “played mute witness to its burning witches, and has walked along a Trail of Tears; it has seen the slave ships release their human cargo, blinking and afraid, into the ports, their only possession a grief they can never lose” (8). In this heady age “of the future, of industry, and prosperity; the future, which does not believe in the evil of the past” occupies the minds of many. However, like the wind that carries the atrocities of American history with it into the present, unable to forget or look away, *The Diviners* brings the past into the present: both the narrative “present” of 1926 and, by extension, our twenty-first century moment.

Like the novels Saldívar credits for depicting “forms of social belonging that link the realm of public political life to the mysterious workings of the heart’s fantastic aspiration for substantive justice—social, racial, poetic, or otherwise,” *The Diviner’s* historical fantasy operates on the level of both content and form (Saldívar 596). In combining historical fiction with fantasy, the novel’s mash-up form exposes official history as public collective fantasy. The novel’s vision of the US, expressed throughout the novel in passages such as the above, challenges the US’s triumphant master narratives of liberal democracy, while Bray’s diverse cast of characters reflect and embody difference, in all its beautiful messiness, as an integral part of America’s past and present.

The novel’s third person narrator follows the lives of several central teenage characters. Evie O’Neil, Memphis Campbell, Mabel Rose, Theta Knight, Henry DuBois, Sam Lloyd, and Jericho Jones. Evie, Memphis, Sam, Theta, and Henry are all “diviners” (although they don’t all know it yet in at this point in the trilogy): gifted with special powers. Evie can read the minds of individuals by touching something that belongs to them and Memphis can heal people by laying hands on them. Sam can make himself invisible, Henry can “walk” in the dreams of others, and Theta can set things on fire with her hands when her emotions are roused. While not a “diviner” in the same way as the others, Jericho is also a meta-human. Near the end of the novel, he is revealed to be part machine. The characters’ separate storylines are gradually united as they fight to stop a serial killer who terrorizes New York City. The renegade band of teenage detectives-turned-superhuman warriors, with the aid of Evie’s Uncle Will, a professor of occult studies, soon realize that the serial killer is no ordinary madman. Instead, the perpetrator of the brutal killings turns out to be Naughty John, the ghost of John Hobbes, a religious fanatic who led an obscure cult in the nineteenth century and who was hanged for murder fifty years earlier. However, Naughty John represents only one manifestation of the forces of evil gathering around New York City in 1926. Although Naughty John is eventually cast back into darkness through the combined efforts of the diviners, the novel’s ending suggests that the ultimate battle against



the forces of darkness has only just begun: the mysterious Man in the Stovepipe Hat waits and watches from another realm, ready to release the evil forces which the team will tackle in *Lair of Dreams* (Book Two).

Formally, the narrative is divided into chapters that closely follow one of the central characters, switching perspectives with each new chapter. Evie O'Neil, the sassy blond flapper from Ohio who is sent to live with her Uncle Will in Manhattan after getting in trouble for brandishing her special powers at a party, is nominally the main protagonist in *The Diviners*. However, close behind her in terms of narrative space is Memphis Campbell, a young numbers runner in Harlem with literary aspirations. In including both the urban and cultural spaces of Harlem in the 1920s as vital to the narrative, yet without essentializing or tokenizing black history, *The Diviners* avoids replicating a white domination of history.

From his entrance in the narrative, it becomes clear that Memphis belongs to Harlem. When we meet him, he is “perched beneath the street lamp in his spot on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135<sup>th</sup> Street” hustling customers for his numbers running business (Bray 23). Memphis and his fellow number runners can be found all over Harlem: “From 130<sup>th</sup> Street north to 160<sup>th</sup> Street, from Amsterdam Avenue on the West Side clear over to Park Avenue on the east” (23). In sketching the boundaries of Harlem in 1926, Bray’s novel reflects the historical patterns of black migration from the US south to major cities in the early twentieth century and the subsequent transition of Harlem from a white suburb to the heart of the African American cultural renaissance in the 1920s. Before WWI, “roughly 90 percent of America’s Negro population still lived in the South, 78 percent of them in the countryside” (Douglas 73). However, in what came to be known as the “Great Migration,” blacks began to move northward, pulled by the promise of greater freedom and the employment opportunities that opened up during the war years. As Douglas notes:

454,000 blacks left the South between 1910 and 1920; 749,000 more did so in the next decade. Between 1900 and 1930, the total number of Negroes in the North increased by

almost 300 percent; the black population in all American cities went from 22 percent in 1900 to 40 percent in 1930. In 1890, one in seventy people in Manhattan was a Negro; in 1930, one in every nine. (73)

In Harlem specifically, the black population rose from “a mere handful in 1900” to “close to 200,000” during the 1920s. According to Douglas, Harlem’s transformation from “the rural retreat of the aristocratic New Yorker” with rows of “stunning” brownstone houses inhabited by a “traditionally minded British, German, Jewish, and Irish” community to ethnic enclave was largely the result of an ill-planned white real-estate boom prompted by the opening of the Lenox Avenue subway line, which was intended to attract white middle-class investors and inhabitants (310). However, “for various reasons,” the plan failed (310). Black renters and realtors, under the leadership of Philip A. Payton, Jr., seized the opportunity to fill vacant real estate at low costs. As blacks moved in, whites moved out. “Between 1920 and 1930,” Douglas reports, “118,792 whites left Harlem and 87,417 Negroes arrived” (311-312). In the novel, Memphis, who lives with his Aunt Octavia and younger brother Isaiah in Harlem, represent part of this “Great Migration.”

But it’s more than his home address that makes Memphis a true Harlemit of the 1920s. While Bray’s novel uses concrete detail to situate Memphis and his family within the historical topography of Harlem, his literary dreams emphasize his connection to Harlem. His friend Alma introduces Memphis as the boy “who lives at the library over on 135<sup>th</sup> Street. Wants to be the next Langston Hughes” (Bray 73). Indeed, Memphis admits to himself that he wants more than anything “to read his poetry at one of Miss A’Leila Walker’s salons, alongside Countee Cullen, Zora Neal Hurston, and Jean Toomer—maybe even beside Mr. Hughes himself” (76). As he scribbles lines of poetry in his ever-present notebook, Memphis draws inspiration from Harlem: “All around him, Harlem was alive with writers, musicians, poets, and thinkers. They were changing the world. Memphis wanted to be part of that change” (81). By introducing readers to Memphis via his connection to a community invested in specific racial and aesthetic projects,

instead of through racialized bodily markers (such as skin color or hair texture), Bray's novel avoids defining non-white characters by phenotypical difference, a commonly used, essentializing racialized lens. Furthermore, Bray shapes Memphis' character around his artistic talents and ambitions, which gives him agency as an individual, instead of shaping his character around monolithic constructions of community, heritage, or tradition. While there is nothing inherently problematic with characters whose identities draw from shared values, when it comes to non-white characters, such themes often result in static, stereotypical depictions of sweeping racialized identities where characters lack individual agency. Within the speculative genres in particular, issues of a character's "special ability," while not overtly raced often rely on underlying structures that are arguably racialized. For example, in *Habits of Whiteness*, Young notes that most protagonists in contemporary fantasy "inherit their supernatural identity components biologically, that is, through their family. Race, in twenty-first-century Western society is the category of identity most closely linked to descent by far" (Young 144). Thus even supernatural abilities rely on coded racialized structures of identity. However, while Memphis and his brother Isaiah are both "diviners," the text never links any of the characters' abilities to issues of genetics or descent. Memphis and Isaiah, at this point in the trilogy, represent the only diviners who share genetics as well as supernatural abilities and their individual talents manifest themselves in different ways. Indeed, in the novel, shared supernatural talents bring together, not a descent-based community engaged in a timeless tradition of fighting darkness, but a collection of very different young people from very diverse backgrounds.

The salons hosted by A'Leila Walker that Memphis longs to attend are a historical reality. An heiress, Walker used her money to throw lavish parties and to support the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance from her Harlem townhouse, the "Dark Tower." Renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent and Aaron Douglas gathered for art exhibits and poetry readings in the "Dark Tower."<sup>4</sup> In salons like Miss Walker's, the young "Negro" writers idolized by Memphis were rebelling against the "polite" and "well-spoken"

Negritude of a previous generation (Douglas 82). While some of their white counterparts debated whether or not they were, in fact, a so-called “lost generation,” it’s worth remembering that many (but not all) black modernists felt as if they “faced a national culture in which the Negro artist has always been ‘lost’—until, the members of the Harlem Renaissance believed, the present. Now, they proclaimed, was the first hour of real hope for the Negro in America” (87-88). They were, as Memphis says, “changing the world” and he wants to be a part of this social change (87-88).

Langston Hughes’ *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926, reappears throughout *The Diviners* and not just within the urban-cultural spaces of Harlem, reflecting how black cultural production reached beyond the borders of neighborhood (in spite of legal and informal social segregation). When a fellow chorus girl spies Theta (who is not from Harlem) with a copy of the book, she scoffs at her for reading “Negro poetry” (Bray 135). But, later, when Memphis and Theta meet during at speakeasy outside of Harlem, she notices that Memphis also has a copy of Hughes’ book. Their shared love of Hughes cements an initial physical attraction. On their first date, the two quote lines from the titular poem to each other, each confessing they’d “never read anything so beautiful before” (341). Although it would be many years before Hughes’ work would receive much critical acclaim or popularity outside of Harlem, Theta’s familiarity with Hughes in the year of *The Weary Blues*’ release foreshadows his eventual circulation and appeal. Additionally, Theta relieves Memphis of bearing all of the narrative weight of connecting readers to the Harlem Renaissance and becoming tokenized in the process. Instead of simply linking black cultural production in the 1920s to Harlem via the novel’s black protagonist, Bray’s novel shows how a text like *The Weary Blues* created opportunities for meaningful connections between and across different people. Indeed, the intertextual presence of Hughes’ *The Weary Blues* does more than bring Theta and Memphis together. It connects them to an urban tradition of simultaneous dissent and celebration, a recognition of the limits of the status quo and an invocation for social change. Hughes’ work unabashedly chronicled the lives of everyday black people in Harlem in

their own language (for which he was rebuked by both black and white critics at the time),<sup>5</sup> and yet from such a particular locus of enunciation, Hughes' work taps deep into themes of alienation, struggle, survival, and the desperate need to experience joy in times of darkness. These are the themes that draw Theta, who hides her own troubled past and dark secrets behind her good looks and scrappy street smarts. *The Weary Blues* connects the characters and, indeed, the novel itself to what Hughes described as his subject matter: ". . . people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten" (*Autobiography: The Big Sea*, qtd. on The Poetry Foundation website). As *The Weary Blues* circulates openly through the pages of *The Diviners*, not as a suppressed or shadowed "other" in the way Toni Morrison has written of the unconscious "Africanist presence" in white American literature,<sup>6</sup> it functions as a constant reminder of the existence of America's nonwhite literary history. This intertextual relationship asks readers not only to continually recall a black literary tradition, but to also think contemporarily about literary diversity. More broadly, such intertextuality reminds readers how texts circulate through communities of readers with the power to inspire, not only individual hopes and dreams, but also meaningful collective action and social change.

Bray's novel avoids the pitfalls of a "post-racial" approach to diversity wherein racial-ethnic difference is construed either biologically through physical traits or through a character's connection to "tradition" or "heritage." Rather, it shows how difference affects the real lives of people in her historical-fictional world. The most powerful example of how race shapes the day-to-day lives of people occurs when Memphis brings Theta to a party in Harlem, thrown by Alma and her girlfriend, Rita. While no one at the party appears bothered by the presence of an openly gay couple, the interracial relationship between Memphis and Theta leads to a dramatic scene between Memphis and his best friend, Gabe. Although Theta's dark good looks suggest an ethnically ambiguous heritage, she more or less "passes" as white. For example, when Memphis first meets Theta, he asks her: "You French? Got a French look to you. Maybe even a little

Creole.” Theta responds, “I look like everybody” (Bray 264). Memphis decides to call her “Creole Princess” anyway. Later Memphis presses Theta about her heritage—“But where are your people from?” (369). Theta then explains that she was adopted as a baby and doesn’t know anything about her ethnic heritage. So when she walks into the Harlem house party on Memphis’ arm, they’re greeted with “raised eyebrows and one or two stares” (Bray 368). Rita mostly diffuses the situation, but Memphis’ pal Gabe pulls him aside to warn him about the social consequences of dating a “white girl.” Memphis protests, “It’s a free country,” but Gabe knows better: “No, it isn’t. You know that.” Memphis thinks it *should* be a free country. Gabe says, “*Should* and *is* aren’t the same thing. What happens when she gets tired of you, or worse, accuses you of something? You remember Rosewood?” Gabe references destruction of the predominantly black town of Rosewood in 1923 in response to rumors that a local black man had sexually assaulted a white woman, Fanny Taylor. A group of 200 white men from the surrounding area burnt the town, slaughtered the animals and killed at least six blacks. No one was charged for the Rosewood crimes.<sup>7</sup> Gabe’s warning recognizes the material threat to black lives under the white supremacy of the 1920s. It was a time of anti-miscegenation laws forbidding relationships between blacks and whites, when structures of legal segregation were still in place. Gabe begs Memphis to be more cautious, acknowledging the systematic and intentional targeting of black lives by both state and extrajudicial forces on the basis of anti-black racism. “It’s not enough they’re slumming it up here and taking the best tables in our own clubs when we can’t even get a table in theirs! Or that they’re trying to take over our business from the inside . . . Now you want to go around and parade with one of them?” Gabe protests (368-69). Gabe’s anger, channeled toward Memphis and Theta, is fundamentally a reaction against how white power and structural inequality were made manifest through cultural and economic appropriations of black spaces and black culture by whites. While some might read Memphis’ decision to openly date Theta as a protest against racism, Gabe believes Memphis is needlessly risking his life: “You get caught by the wrong people, and you won’t be able to heal what they’ll

do to you” (Bray 368-69). Gabe doesn’t just imply that Memphis could die as a result of dating interracially, he alludes to deep psychological violence perpetrated on nonwhite bodies by white supremacy—what the Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as “*una herida abierta*,” an open wound that never heals (Anzaldúa 31). Whether or not Memphis and Theta will face threats greater than hostile looks or a stern lecture remains to be seen, but by addressing the real, material affects of racial difference under white hegemony, Bray’s novel does not participate in watered down multiculturalism where difference functions solely as a marker of identity. Rather, the text links forms of difference to the social structures and operations of power that create and define it.

The social and cultural shifts taking place in Harlem were part of the larger changes of US society in general, but New York City in particular. If Bray’s novel suggests that a connection exists between US polyglot society, moments of particular social upheaval and the emergence of dark supernatural forces, New York in 1926 serves as the ideal setting to showcase this relationship. Indeed, New York functions as a powerful chronotope for American modernism. As Ann Douglas demonstrates, “New York in the 1920s celebrated excitement, danger, record-making and record-breaking, catastrophe and farce, all of it” (Douglas 27). In the era that saw the US become the world’s most powerful nation, New York became renown “as the world’s most powerful city. The census of 1920 declared America for the first time in its history an urban nation, and New York was the largest city in that urban nation” (Douglas 4). New York was where media was born, the throbbing, Charleston-ing heart of jazz and blues, of glitzy theater and pop art. Home to the writers, black and white, who would define the generation, New York represented America’s coolest literary scene. In the 1920s, New York was under constant construction: “modern New York as we still know today, with its skyscrapers, tunnels, bridges, and adjacent speedways” was built during this era (Douglas 17). Infrastructure followed population demographics: “New York’s population doubled between 1910 and 1930” (Douglas 15). Bray’s detailed, evocative writing captures this booming, bustling hustling metropolis in its

most feverish moment. In *The Diviners*, New York is a “gleaming” city “frantic with ambition, rich in the commerce of longing, a golden paradise of businessmen prophets, billboards advertising the abundance argued on Wall Street, promised by Madison Avenue,” alive with “taxi horns, trolley cars, and trains” or the shouts of “the newsies hawking the day’s headlines in Times Square,” while “majestic skyscrapers” rose “over it all like gleaming steel, brick, and glass gods” (Bray 572, 6). Beneath the shiny optimism of progress and world domination, lies, of course, the chaos, fragmentations, and disappointments of modernism—“Just a bunch of chess pieces moved about by unseen hands in a universe bored with itself,” Evie thinks to herself at one point, capturing what Bray sums up at the novel’s end as “the longing and the disillusionment of the people” (574). Longings and disillusionment were not only consequences of WWI and global reconfigurations, as scholars of the modernist period have argued, but also the result of intense domestic turmoil:

This was the age of ‘Red’ scares and race riots, of a burgeoning Ku Klux Klan and shrinking labor union, of stiff and biased immigration laws and an enormous gap between the incomes of the wealthy and the poor. Shocking to tell, 71 percent of American families in the 1920s had annual incomes below \$2,500, the minimum needed for decent living. (Douglas 18)

In the light such real material struggles, Douglas argues that New York in the 1920s had “a dual nature”—“both a No Man’s Land expert in modish despair and a city ‘built with a wish’” (28). Thus the “conflicts and clashes” of the nation were experienced in a heightened fashion along the bustling avenues of the city. *The Diviners* captures this modernist tension between excitement and despair. While the novel’s expert scene-setting and detailed writing invoke New York’s pluralistic optimism, Bray’s characters also embody the conflicts, disappointments and struggles beneath the fizzy expansiveness of New York in the 1920s.

The novel engages with America’s troubled immigrant past, specifically how immigrant communities, new and older, shaped the social landscape of New York in the 1920s. As the



population of New York and, indeed, the US boomed during these years, racial and ethnic demographics shifted. Between 1880 and 1920, an estimated 28 million immigrants arrived, the vast majority of them passing through New York's Ellis Island (304). Indeed, "by the early 1920s, about half the nation's population was first- or second-generation immigrant, and in the big cities the proportion was still higher. Three-quarters of the nation's immigrants in the late nineteenth century came to New York." In contrast to earlier immigrants, who came mainly from the British Isles and Western Europe, during the early twentieth century, immigrants were overwhelmingly Southern and Eastern European. By 1910, Eastern and Southern Europeans made up 70 percent of the immigrants entering the country (*EyeWitness to History*). An early scene in the chapter appropriately titled "City of Dreams," follows second-generation immigrant, Ruta Badowski (Bates), the first of Naughty John's victims, as she returns home from dancing all night. She crosses paths with Naughty John while on her way to Greenpoint, Brooklyn "where her family lived in a two-room apartment in a crumbling building on a street where nearly everyone spoke Polish and the old men smoked cigarettes in front of store windows draped with fat strands of kielbasa" (Bray 61). This image reflects historical patterns of migration and settlement amongst immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. New immigrants "were no longer dispersing themselves across the nation but collecting ominously in vast city enclaves fast becoming 'ghettos'" where cultural elements from "the old country" could be preserved (Douglas 305).

Like many second-generation immigrants, Ruta distinguishes herself from both previous generations of immigrants and the new arrivals. Unlike her parents, who were born in Poland, Ruta's proud to have "been born here, in Brooklyn." In fact, Naughty John secures her confidence by playing into her patriotism when he gestures to a couple of lately arrived "riffraff" passed out on a nearby stoop: "Someone should clean up this sort of riffraff, turn them back at the borders. They're not like you and me, Miss Bates. Clean. Good citizens. People with ambitions" (Bray 63). Ruta agrees: "They *were* different from her family. *Foreign*." In

distinguishing herself from other immigrants, Ruta reflects what Douglas identifies as “the arts of exactitude, of distinguishing one thing from all else that may resemble it,” which were, she argues, “the moderns’ stock-in-trade” (Douglas 35). When extended to specific groups of people, this tendency to *distinguish* led to a rise in nativism and the passing of immigration restriction laws aimed at preserving a narrowly defined national and racial identity in opposition to others.

Before 1920, numbers or quotas did not restrict immigration to the US. With the exception of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1880), freedom of movement was considered a democratic value and immigration had been historically encouraged (Ngai 18). However, in the 1920s, new immigration laws, mainly the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, established a system of quotas based on national origins in order to control immigration. These laws reflected societal unease over America’s changing population. Social perceptions of race and ethnicity became codified into laws, which, in turn, created and reinforced ideas, images, and assumptions about identity that the media were more than eager to disseminate. Like Ruta, many Americans were quick to distinguish between “us” and “them.” However, these distinctions often remained fluid. For instance, while Ruta clearly identifies herself as a “born here” American, “New York’s finest” see it somewhat differently. When Naughty John’s second victim is revealed to be a young Irish immigrant, the police note, “Tommy Duffy was Irish. Ruta Badowski was Polish. The killer could harbor a hatred of foreigners” (Bray 181). Thus, in the eyes of the law, Ruta’s Polish ethnicity (and Tommy’s Irishness) is understood as *foreign* (i.e., nonwhite) when measured against a white, Anglo-Saxon norm.

Distrust and even “hatred of foreigners” was a social reality in the 1920s. While previously immigrants had been seen as “part of an unending supply of docile, industrious, cheap, and quickly Americanized labor,” changing immigration and demographic trends raised, for many white Americans, “the alarming specter of an unemployed, ill-educated, and angry mob of foreigners with no real stake in the American enterprise, with no knowledge of Anglo-Saxon values and traditions” (Douglas 305). Nativist rhetoric characterized and denounced immigrants

“as either a radical threat or an inferior stock that undermined the welfare of American workers” (Portes and Rumbaut 99). Madison Grant’s wildly circulated tract, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), popularized a eugenics movement by arguing, “the immigration of the defective races of the world threatened to erode the US’s moral and intellectual character” (Graves 120). Eugenacists not only argued for the use of eugenics measures to preserve the Anglo-Saxon/Nordic race, but also to stop the immigration of those races seen as “inferior.”

In *The Diviners*, Evie and Jericho encounter the eugenics movement when they are under cover at a county fair outside the city. An advertising board catches Evie’s eye: “THE HUMAN BETTERMENT FOUNDATION: MAKING AMERICA STRONG THROUGH THE SCIENCE OF EUGENICS” (Bray 469). A passing nurse asks the two: “Do you know about eugenics? It’s a wonderful scientific movement designed to help America achieve her full potential.” She continues:

There are the unfortunates. The degenerates. The unfit, insane, crippled, and feeble-minded. The repeat criminals found in the lower classes. The defects particular to certain races. Many of the agitators causing such unrest in our society are an example of the inferior element who are leading to a mongrelization of our American culture. Purity is the cornerstone of our great civilization. Eugenics proposes *corrections* for what is sick in our society . . . Imagine an America in which our physical and social ills have been red out of us . . . A true democracy! All men are not created equal, but they could be. (470)

The novel suggests parallel plots between the supernatural and natural, between Naughty John’s vision to redeem a broken, sinful world through total destruction and rebirth with eugenacists’ desire to cleanse the nation and “restore” it to its (mythologized) Anglo-Saxon roots. “The Brethern,” the name Bray gives to the cult-like group of followers Naughty John’s spirit commands, find in his pseudo-spiritual rhetoric what many middle-class white Americans found in eugenics: a simple solution to social turmoil.

While pseudo-scientific movements such as eugenics represented one nativist response to immigration, America's legal system responded with restrictive immigration laws. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act established a system of quotas for immigration based on national origins that included built-in hierarchies of racial desirability. The quota system restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, excluded "aliens ineligible for citizenship" (most Asian immigrants), while placing no restrictions on immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Thus the Johnson-Reed Act

Constructed a vision of the American nation that embodied certain hierarchies of race and nationality . . . At one level, the new immigration law differentiated Europeans according to nationality and ranked them in a hierarchy of desirability. At another level, the law constructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness distinct from those deemed not to be white. (Ngai 23-25)

The national origins quota system created new categories of both race *and* ethnicity in the US. The racial categories of "white" and "nonwhite" became legalized through immigration status (the invention of the "illegal alien" as a nonwhite person) at the same time that national origins cultivated a growing awareness of ethnicity, which emphasized that differences were "socially rather than biologically acquired" (Lee 28). During the interwar years, ethnicity was "a malleable and open-ended concept, emerging from the efforts of social scientists to unseat the notion that biological racial divides were intractable and that races could be ranked as superior or inferior" (Lee 28).<sup>8</sup> Instead, arguments centered on questions of assimilation versus pluralism and a corresponding temporal tension between the past (descent-based identities) and forward-looking politics. Thus, the minority characters in Bray's novel are also significant because they embody the very categories of difference whose present-day meanings were being created and solidified through law and cultural during at this historical moment.

While questions of ethnicity and assimilation were contentious and often murky, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act firmly institutionalized the question of racial assimilation for Asians. In

addition to creating a quota system based on national origins, the act “provided for the exclusion of persons ineligible to citizenship” (Ngai 37). Ineligibility to citizenship and exclusion applied to all people from East and South Asia. The origins of racial language of restriction, according to Ngai, were located in the legal definition of “white” and the rule of racial unassimilability, which declared “Asiatic” peoples as incapable of assimilating in the US. The law thus extended the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese from entering the US.

While the particular history of New York’s Chinatown and the trajectory of racialization for Asians and Asian Americans play a central role in *Lair of Dreams*, this history is also present in *The Diviners*. As Evie and Uncle Will pass through Chinatown during Mid-Autumn Festival, Evie notices a long line of men in front of a shop. Her uncle conjectures that the men are most likely sending letters home to their wives, in China. When Evie asks why their wives aren’t with them, Will responds: “The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 . . . What do they teach in schools these days? . . . The Chinese Exclusion Act was a law designed to keep more Chinese from coming here once they’d finished building our railroads. They couldn’t bring their families over. They weren’t protected by our law. They were on their own” (Bray 109). The origins of this exclusion lay in a potent combination of economic crisis and unemployment after an age of unprecedented growth and fears over racial purity. “Within this context of economic crisis and social strife,” historian Ron Takaki writes, “Congress voted to make it unlawful for Chinese laborers to enter the US for the next ten years and denied naturalized citizenship to the Chinese already here” (Takaki, *Strangers* 111). In 1888, the lawmakers broadened the law to include “all persons of the Chinese race.”<sup>9</sup> By legislating the disappearance of the Chinese presence in the US (from 105,465 in 1880 to 61,639 in 1920), the US deflected anxiety over labor competition into a racial ideology of purity and contamination that became codified through law. White Americans not only agreed that unlike the nineteenth century European immigrant, the Chinese immigrant “could not be transformed into an American,” but also that the Chinese represented a serious threat to a white homogenous society (Takaki, *Mirror* 206).<sup>10</sup> Takaki quotes politician John F.

Miller at the 1878 California Constitutional Convention: “Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people, it would be the lowest, most vile and degraded of our race, and the result of that amalgamation would be a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth” (qtd. in *Mirror* 205). The mixed race “hybrid” Miller fears does, indeed, sound “monstrous” enough for a sci-fi or fantasy plot. Yet whatever monstrosity white nativists feared from racial contamination was not more hideous than the practices of exclusion, segregation, and racial hatred already firmly in place in the US.

Upon learning about Chinese exclusion, Evie thinks it “doesn’t sound terribly American,” but Will is quick to remind her: “On the contrary, it’s very American” (Bray 109). Will’s rejoinder recalls Gabe’s reminder that America isn’t actually a free country. Both moments critique the cherished master narratives of American exceptionalism, compelling reminders throughout the novel that injustice and exclusion define “America” and “American” as much as freedom and democracy. Raised on the promises of “God and country. Love your parents. All is fair,” part of Evie’s journey through the novel is a journey of disillusionment with generation who had “sold their children a pack of lies,” while she comes to consciousness about the presence and persistence of evil (554). By the end of the novel, she “knew now that the world was a long way from fair. She knew the monsters were real” (554). The monsters Evie and the other diviners face are, on the one hand, the supernatural forces of darkness, but the novel has also clearly implied from the start that not all evil is supernatural in origin---atrocities, like charity, begins at home.

As the novel progresses (and, indeed, as the trilogy is progressing), other characters’ storylines become more important and take up more narrative space.<sup>11</sup> These characters broaden the scope of difference in the novel to include considerations of class and sexual difference, important sites of tension in the interwar years that emerged at once in line with and odds with race-based struggles. In the modernist period, class struggle was often raced as well. Prominent Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, traveled

to Moscow and were directly involved in leninst critiques of imperialism and capitalism.<sup>12</sup> When the Harlem Renaissance journal *The Messenger* wrote about the “new negro” the idea of “social equality” was key: “in fact, the interests of all Negroes are tied up with the workers. Therefore, the Negro should support a working class political party.” They advocated that “the Negro join the labor unions” and fight against white union discrimination (*The Messenger*, vol II, August 1920, qtd. in Patton and Honey 8). Indeed the alignment of art and revolution produced “striking, eccentric ways of expressing cultural difference,” motivated by the “similar potential of avant-garde and minority cultures to level hierarchies and bring art into life—that is, to shatter or open exclusive canons and to dismantle the divide between high and low” (Lee 2, 4). One of the crucial links between race-based and class-based struggles in the modernist period, was, according to Lee, authenticity: “to be authentic meant to reject mass culture and commercialization” (121). Yet while one could be “authentically black by being anticapitalist,” being anticapitalist didn’t always align with other social justice projects. Nonetheless, the rejection of mass culture and commercialization, along with Soviet-inspired critiques of capitalism became constitutive of certain radical ethnic identities in New York City in the 1920s. In particular, labor strikes and union organizing amongst Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side “created a broadly based radical Jewish consciousness” (Takaki, *Mirror* 297).

Mabel Rose, Evie’s best friend-neighbor in New York, is a product of this intersection of class and ethnicity in the modernist period. The daughter of prominent New York socialists, Mabel’s father is a Jewish immigrant from a modest background, and her mother is a white Protestant (former socialite), whose cross-ethnic love brought her to political consciousness as a young woman. Mabel’s background and personal journey into politics accurately represents the heated political landscape of 1920s, which was the beginning of the end for American socialism. In the US, the Socialist Party emerged and blossomed between 1900-1912, under the charismatic leadership of the labor organizer Eugene Debs. However, by the 1920s, support for socialism in the US was rapidly declining, partly as a result of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, as

well as post-WWI disillusionment and internal factionalism between socialists, communists, and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (founded by “Mother” Mary Harris Jones). Legislation such as the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 included language that made acts of disloyalty punishable by law. By 1919, suspicion of suspected communists and socialists led to the Red Scare, in which 5,000 people were arrested and jailed on suspicion of disloyal activity.<sup>13</sup> 600 of those arrested were deported, reflecting a popular belief that “immigrant workers transported the ‘virus’ of socialistic ideas that threatened to undermine American democratic institutions” (Portes and Rumbaut 98). Here, the language of contamination used to warn against the threat of socialism echoes the racialized language used to warn Americans against the threat of “invasion” by the Chinese, Irish, and other immigrants who were perceived by nativists to represent a racial and cultural threat to the fabric of America. Thus stereotypes about race, ethnicity, class, and national origin coalesced around political affiliation, contributing to the “hysteria” of the Red Scare and nativist movements.

Early in the novel, Mabel tells Evie that her parents are out for the evening because “there’s a rally for the appeal of Sacco and Vanzetti downtown.” She says, “my mother and father are representing *The Proletariat*,” referring to the socialist newspaper her parents operated and distributed” (Bray 54). Here, Bray references the famous trial of the communist activists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, whose conviction of robbery and murder was driven by prejudice against their radical political beliefs and a sign of the increasing targeting of communists and socialists.<sup>14</sup> Mabel reveals the extent to which she has internalized her parents’ socialist fervor during an awkward supper with Evie and Jericho. Mabel argues that “poverty and ignorance” are the true evil of society and asserts: “I’m an atheist. Religion is the opiate of the masses” (Bray 230). Jericho attacks Mabel for simply parroting Karl Marx and her parents without thinking for herself. Eventually, Mabel finds her own way into socialism, which includes more than just rhetoric. A narrow escape from police brutality and arrest at a political rally encourages Mabel to synthesize her parents’ beliefs and her own readings with real life



experiences. In documenting Mabel's class consciousness and growing awareness of her own radical politics, Bray's novel rejects the assumption that young adults are apolitical or apathetic—a label frequently applied to the young mods of the Jazz Age.<sup>15</sup> Mabel's narrative arc creates space for a critique of capitalism within the novel and embodies the historical reality of poverty and deep class divisions, as well the uneven relationship between race, ethnicity, and class in the US during the 1920s. Thus the novel not only counters a white domination of history, it also links forces of social domination to the growing hegemony of capitalism as a monolithic system of social, political, and economic organization and control in the US.

It is this very diversity of the US, represented in Bray's cast of characters, that the novel suggests is at the heart of the forces of darkness preying upon the city. "Something," Uncle Will argues at one point:

Is drawing the likes of John Hobbes. Some energy here. Spirits are attracted to seismic energy shifts, chaos and political upheaval, religious movements, war and intervention, industry and innovation. There were said to be a great many ghost sightings and unexplained phenomenon reported during the American Revolution, and again during the Civil War. This country is founded on a certain tension . . . There is a dualism inherent in democracy—opposing forces pushing against each other, always. Culture clashes. Different belief systems. All coming together to create this country. But this balance takes a great deal of energy—and, as I've said, spirits are attracted to energy. (Bray 457)

Will links the supernatural to America's past and present struggles to create and sustain one nation out of many "cultures." What Will refers to here (and elsewhere) as "clashes" not only of cultures "but also spirits and superstitions," (42) reflects the kind of watered-down multiculturalist rhetoric that tends to elide histories of racial formation and racialization. However, while multiculturalist rhetoric usually focuses on the collective celebration of diversity ("we're all different together!"), Will instead focuses on the disruptions—those "opposing

forces” of difference that, in the present moment of the novel, are directly responsible for drawing supernatural forces of evil and also for creating categories of difference and identity that remain more or less intact until the 1960s.

In *The Diviners*, Libba Bray “darkens” the promises of the American Dream. America may be a “pledge” and the land “an idea of freedom, born from the collective yearning of a restless nation built on dreams,” but in the novel, freedom is more of an “idea” than a reality and dreams are, more often than not, dead or dark or not to be trusted (571). For the US is also a land of “longing and disillusionment” (574). The America dreamt of by immigrant and citizen alike is a fantasy of inclusion and opportunity. The reality of America past and present, Bray shows, is both more beautifully diverse and achingly unjust. The very diversity celebrated by master narratives of multiculturalism turns out to be, in the world of the novel, a fragmenting force that attracts evil. The specter of supernatural darkness thus allegorizes the traditions of exclusion, discrimination, injustice and hatred that constitute US history. Bray uses the possibilities of historical fantasy not only to re-imagine US history from the borders, but also to comment back on the US’s present moment. As the diviners reckon with what it means to be different in 1926, the novel asks readers to consider how far we have come. *The Diviners* illustrates continuity between past and present in the US’s continuing struggle to manage difference and diversity, from debates over further immigration restriction laws to the continued systematic oppression of nonwhite peoples. Yet by crossing the borders of time, space, reality, and genre, Bray reminds readers of the possibility to imagine alternative possibilities. She uses interstitial space to harness the inner desire to believe in a better world, where sites of difference no longer function as sites of exclusion.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On their website, the Young Adult Library Services Association defines Young Adult as ages 12-18.

<sup>2</sup> The second installment of Bray's trilogy, *Lair of Dreams*, was released in 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Bray writes of her writing and extensive research processes frequently on her popular blog (<https://libbabray.wordpress.com/>) and elsewhere on her social media.

<sup>4</sup> See White, "Walker, A'Leila (1885-1931)"

<sup>5</sup> See "Langston Hughes," *The Poetry Foundation*

<sup>6</sup> See Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

<sup>7</sup> See Goodloe, "Rosewood Massacre, 1923"

<sup>8</sup> Anthropologists at the time were extremely interested in questions of ethnicity vs. race. Franz Boas' work famously attempted to demonstrate how different groups dispersed spatially allowing for intermixture, while Robert Park emphasizes the ability of cultures to adapt and transform, especially in urban areas (Lee 29).

<sup>9</sup> Restrictions to Chinese immigration remained in place until 1943

<sup>10</sup> As Takaki notes, nativist fears over a Chinese "invasion" were unfounded: "The Chinese constituted a mere .002 percent of the United States population in 1882" (*Mirror* 206).

<sup>11</sup> In *Lair of Dreams*, the second book of the trilogy, we are introduced to another central character, Ling Chan. A queer Chinese American young woman, Ling is also a dream-walker, like Henry. Her storyline links a mysterious sleeping sickness which originates in Chinatown to the history of New York's Chinatown, and histories of Asian/Asian American racialization in the US more broadly.

<sup>12</sup> See Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde*

<sup>13</sup> See "Socialism in America," *U-S\_history.com*

<sup>14</sup> See Frankfurter, "The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti"

<sup>15</sup> Part-time New Yorker and champion of the age F. Scott Fitzgerald famously dismissed the Jazz Age as "having no politics at all" (qtd. in Douglas 18).

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