Motherhood and Freedom in Women's Writing After 1970

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Abstract

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Fifty years after a high point of feminist theories of reproductive work, motherhood remains fraught. Considering contemporary Anglophone writing about care alongside literature from the 1970s and 1980s, *Motherhood and Freedom in Women's Writing After 1970* claims that past feminist theories of reproductive work have yet to be fully reckoned with. I argue that Anglophone literature of motherhood elaborates an embodied, non-sovereign freedom which emerges socially and is based on interdependence rather than self-possession. This literature defamiliarizes care through formal innovation, encouraging and enacting a form of attention that generates a new, feminist reality. Chapter 1 considers care work, artistic work, illness, and embodiment in the writings of Bernadette Mayer and Anne Boyer, asking how literary form highlights or obscures the world-making properties of care. Chapter 2 discusses how 1970s and 1980s black feminist texts think about care outside the family after the Civil Rights movement, arguing that *Meridian* by Alice Walker (1976) and *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara

(1980) articulate a notion of self-elaboration that is non-sovereign, anti-austerity, and intersubjective. In chapter 3, I consider how texts by Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti generate a feminist imaginary oriented around openness and possibility rather than choice. Chapter 4 argues that Octavia Butler's novel, *Wild Seed* (1980), and Maggie Nelson's memoir, *The Argonauts* (2015), offer visions of embodied transformation that lead to new concepts of pleasure in motherhood. *Motherhood and Freedom in Women's Writing After 1970* argues that literature of motherhood reimagines reality with care at its center.

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Introduction[1]

Motherhood is both ordinary and hard to grasp. Today, in most countries, over three-quarters of women become mothers.[2] Moreover, motherhood shapes everyone's life, to some extent; even people not raised by a mother or mothers are born from one.[3] At the same time, motherhood continues to be marginalized. Some people reacted with surprise when I said that I was writing my dissertation on literature of motherhood, as if I had located an eccentric, niche topic. One man, well-meaning, said he "had never realized" there was much of this literature; another said motherhood was a topic he knew nothing about.

It is remarkable that the social institution and the biological process at the center of life can be so little thought about by so many people. As Sophie Lewis points out, "the everyday 'miracle' that transpires in pregnancy, the production of that number more than one and less than two, receives more idealizing lip-service than it does respect," noting that "in 2017 a reader and thinker as compendious as Maggie Nelson can still state, semi incredulously but with a strong case behind her, that philosophical writing about actually doing gestation constitutes an absence in culture" (1). It may be true that "philosophical" writing about pregnancy and childbirth is rare, but there is no shortage of imaginative literature about both biological reproduction and the experience of mothering. But there is, still, a silence around motherhood: new mothers often report having been told little about the concrete details of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood.

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[1] Sections from this introduction appeared in the article, "Bernadette Mayer's *Utopia* as a Model for Care During Crisis," published in *Feminist Theory* 23, vol. 2 (2022).

[2] An exception is Japan, where between 25 and 30 percent of women were "childless" at the end of their reproductive years ("Childlessness"). "Childlessness" statistics generally include births only, not adoptions, so the percentage of women who become mothers is higher.

[3] A possible exception is in the case of a surrogate who does not identify as a mother.

Among many non-mothers, there is a casualness about the experience, a sense that reproduction, as old as the human species, cannot be worth too much thought or trouble.[4]

Finally, those who could advise women about reproduction, having done it themselves, are in the difficult position of being mothers. Mothers' discussion of motherhood is sharply proscribed, limited to the expression of a narrow range of emotions, with the most commonly-accepted answer being "I love it" (Donath 40). Mothers who characterize motherhood as something less than wonderful are often pathologized; disliking motherhood is taken as a sign that something is seriously wrong with the mother, rather than an authentic response to an experience (Donath 42).[5] Beyond the silencing of women whose feelings about motherhood are primarily negative, women who enjoy motherhood for the most part often do not wish to hurt or shock their children, partner(s), or friends by articulating the difficulties of the experience. It is no wonder, then, that the more difficult, horrifying, and traumatic aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering are socially repressed.

That is, some combination of love for one's children, the desire to protect them, and the threat of social condemnation prevents women from speaking too openly about what they lose in becoming mothers. Notable exceptions to this are Alice Walker's novel, *Meridian*, which frankly depicts a young mother's complete disinclination to motherhood, and Orna Donath's study, *Regretting Motherhood*, which presents the (anonymous) testimony of women who regret becoming mothers. When I taught *Meridian* to undergraduates last year, they interpreted Meridian's hatred of motherhood—most unambiguously expressed in the line, "So this . . . is

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[4] Since, as I will argue, all women are constructed by motherhood, this attitude is more common among men.

[5] Donath notes that though maternal ambivalence is more commonly expressed now than in the past, this emotion is still expected to be *progressive*, that is, moving toward the resolution of enjoying motherhood: "in a society where it is not acceptable for a mother to regret having children, focusing only on ambivalence—especially when paired with a progressive narrative of coming to terms with it—becomes more palatable" (45).

what slavery is like" (65)—and her decision to give up her son for adoption as effects of being mothered poorly. Indeed, Meridian's mother is an unsympathetic character; cold and judgmental, she thinks the Civil Rights movement is a joke. But I encouraged students to at least consider the possibility that Meridian's rejection of motherhood is not a sign of pathology, but rather a reasonable response to the conditions of motherhood.

In 2008, Alice Walker's daughter, Rebecca Walker, published an essay accusing her mother of being "a rabid feminist who thought motherhood was about the worst thing that could happen to a woman," claiming that "Feminism has much to answer for denigrating men and encouraging women to seek independence whatever the cost to their families." In a subsequent interview on NPR, Rebecca mentions Alice's essay, "One Child of One's Own," in which Alice discusses her decision to have just one child. Rebecca claims that the essay argues that "if you had more than one child you would be enslaved to your children" ("Rebecca Walker Explains"). In fact, the essay constructs, from the perspective of a black feminist mother, a nuanced critique of the racism of the feminist movement and the failure of many black women to confront sexism. Alice claims that she worried that motherhood would make it hard to write, but that this attitude was "a mistake," and that her "enemy" is not motherhood, but rather "the racism and sexism of an oppressive capitalist society" (363).

At the same time, Alice Walker pushes back against social pressure to have more than one child. As she recounts in "One Child," her mother urged her to have another child soon after the birth of her daughter, "so that Rebecca will have someone to play with, and so you can get it all over with faster" (363). Especially in the context of a culture that is skeptical of only children, Walker's essay is a valuable defense of the choice to have just one and a subtle discussion of what is lost and gained for a mother-artist, ultimately affirming motherhood. Walker writes, "We

are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but *sisters* really, against whatever denies us all that we are" ("One Child" 382). There is nothing in the essay about motherhood as slavery, which suggests, perhaps, that Rebecca Walker's real, unacknowledged target is *Meridian*, which, as Alice mentions in "One Child of One's Own," she wrote while Rebecca was young (381).

It is notable that this profoundly anti-feminist collaboration between Rebecca Walker and the *Daily Mail*[6] seizes on what Susan Bordo calls "the specter of the evil mother" (83). Mothers occupy a paradoxical position: powerful enough to be responsible for the moral and emotional formation of their children, and yet constantly prone to error. In Rebecca Walker's essay, and in its unsubtle framing by the *Daily Mail*, the individual errors of mothers become consolidated into the social, generational error of feminism itself.

The overwhelming pronatalism that still structures American social life, obscuring the various meanings of motherhood for women by insisting that motherhood is simply "natural," is part of what I call patriarchal motherhood. The philosophy of Luce Irigaray demonstrates that all knowledge has been structured by masculinity—art, the sciences, politics, economics, etc. are all *male*. One of the casualties of this patriarchal definition of the world is motherhood itself, and particularly the mother-daughter relationship, as I discuss in my reading of Sheila Heti's 2018 novel, *Motherhood*, in chapter 3. Central to Irigaray's early work is an extended critique of psychoanalysis; she claims that by pinning women's desire to lack (the lack of the phallus or language/the Symbolic), Freud and Lacan, along with patriarchal culture, miss an entire dimension of reality: the reality of women. Mothers, defined by lack under patriarchy, pass this emptiness to their daughters, so that even the supposedly bonding, nourishing practice of breastfeeding

[6] The byline for the *Daily Mail* piece reads "Rebecca Walker for MailOnline," and in an interview with NPR, Walker indicates that she did not write the piece, but that she "stand[s] behind, you know, most of it" ("Rebecca Walker Explains").

becomes oppressive to both: "I received from you only your obliviousness of self, while my presence allowed you to forget this oblivion" ("And the One" 65). Irigaray's philosophy and the literature in this dissertation demonstrate that under patriarchy, women's experiences around reproduction continue to be structured around lack or loss, whether they are mothers or not. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 3, women who refuse motherhood are told that they are missing a fundamental aspect of female experience (or that they are "monsters," depending on the situation).

Paradoxically, women who become mothers are also punished: for mothering wrong, for neglecting other aspects of life, or, in the case of racialized and poor populations, simply for reproducing. In chapter 1, I discuss writing that contests the notion that art and care exist in a zero-sum relation; as Bernadette Mayer writes, "the thing I resent most is when someone says you won't have time to write if you have a family" (*Desires* 64). Under this assumption, all women, whether or not they have children, are missing something. Or as Sheila Heti writes, "Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do, too" (44). A feminist motherhood would generate a meaningful, positive reality for women where there is now loss or lack. I argue that in the two periods I focus on in this dissertation, the 1970s and 1980s and 2010 to the present, Anglophone literature of motherhood attends to embodiment in order to generate a feminist motherhood. What aspects of women's embodiment have been ignored under patriarchy, and what elements of reality have been obscured as a result? How does a renewed focus on the senses, particularly in relations of care, generate a new reality?

A focus on embodiment suggests that form matters. The bodies we have determine what we know about the world; there is no objective position, no "view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway, "Situated" 195). Along similar lines, the form of a text determines

its effects on us. Federica Giardini points out that questions of aesthetic or moral form have been defined by masculinity.[7] This does not mean, however, that "feminine is on the side of matter, of lack of boundaries and order, of a thought that dismisses a theoretical organisation" (4), but rather that women need to define their own forms. Giardini connects feminist form to the question of freedom: "freedom . . . can be conceived as the possibility to invent new forms and names for our real experiences" (5). The literature in this dissertation elaborates a feminist freedom through the question of reproduction by paying attention to form.[8]

The Unfinished Work of 1970s/1980s Feminism

Reading contemporary Anglophone writing about care alongside literature from the 1970s and 1980s makes clear that past feminist theorizations of reproductive work have yet to be fully reckoned with. The world-making possibilities of care work are still being elaborated.[9] As austerity politics was definitively installed against the demands of the movements for racial,

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[7] Along similar lines, Catharine MacKinnon's analysis of rape laws insists upon the importance of developing a feminist form of law. She notes, for example, that rape proceedings assume "that a single, objective state of affairs existed, one which merely needs to be determined by evidence," when the structure of heterosexual sex often precludes men from knowing how a woman is experiencing the act (653-54). She concludes that

> the state's formal norms recapitulate the male point of view on the level of design. In Anglo-American jurisprudence, morals (value judgments) are deemed separable and separated from politics (power contests), and both from adjudication (interpretation). … Courts, forums without predisposition among parties and with no interest of their own, reflect society back to itself resolved. … The separation of form from substance, process from policy, role from theory and practice, echoes and reechoes at each level of the regime its basic norm: objectivity. (655-56)

"The separation of form from substance" is more harmful when the substance (experience) has not given rise to the form that claims to represent it (the law), as in the case of women. If the law is written for you (men, especially men otherwise privileged), this abstraction is not as harmful.

[8] In this dissertation, "the question of reproduction" refers to two related issues: 1) the politics around reproduction itself (birth, abortion, contraception, childcare), and questions of maternal and non-maternal identity and 2) the way that women think about the decision to have children or not. While most of the texts in this dissertation contain instances of biological reproduction, the question of reproduction certainly applies to other means of becoming a parent, like adoption.

[9] In claiming that care makes the world we share, I draw on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's characterization of queer culture as a "world-making project." Berlant and Warner argue that "making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation" (553, 558). While Berlant and Warner are not primarily concerned with childcare, I share and build on their critique of the "private" heterosexual family, particularly in chapter 2.

sexual, gender, and class liberation, much 1970s and 1980s feminism sought a world in which freedom is experienced through interdependent relations of care rather than self-possession.[10] In some cases, this utopianism is lost in readings that focus on the texts' demands for recognition or that object to their perceived essentialism. For example, many contemporary feminists fault Nancy C.M. Hartsock's standpoint theory for its essentialist approach to the sexual division of labor. Indeed, Hartsock claims that

> the unity of mental and manual labor and the directly sensuous nature of much of women's work leads to a more profound unity of mental and manual labor, social and natural worlds, than is experienced by the male worker in capitalism. This unity grows from the fact that women's bodies, unlike men's, can be themselves instruments of production: In pregnancy, giving birth, or lactation, arguments about a division of mental from manual labor are fundamentally foreign. (301)

Besides ignoring "sensuous" work (cleaning, construction, gardening) done by male, waged workers, this argument seems to assume a harmony of physical and emotional processes in the experiences of pregnancy and child-rearing, which fails to take into account the alienation, discomfort, and rage experienced by many pregnant women and mothers. But I suggest that Hartsock's essay is valuable for its speculative elements. Critics of Hartsock's essentialism have tended to miss her insistence that women's "nature" cannot be known under the present organization of society: "There is some biological, bodily component to human existence. But its size and substantive content will remain unknown until at least the certainly changeable aspects of the sexual division of labor are altered" (293). Hartsock's project is thus more usefully

[10] I use the phrase "austerity politics" to refer to political logics that view social services as expendable. Especially during times of economic crisis, care is considered to be secondary or supplementary. As a result, people who do both paid and unpaid care work are punished the most by political austerity.

situated in a tradition of feminist scholarship that understands women's identity as in-process and insists that the elaboration of this identity will help construct a different world.

Along similar lines, Kathi Weeks argues that the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s has been misread as an effort to valorize reproductive work and its demand for compensation misunderstood as an end rather than a political tool. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James argued that capitalist accumulation relied on the unacknowledged and unpaid reproductive work of women, who cared for, fed, and gave birth to workers. Building on this insight, Federici clarified that Wages for Housework is a "political perspective" intended to denaturalize domestic work rather than a demand to be included in the capitalist wage system ("Wages" 15-16). Weeks points out that "the demand for wages confounds the division between work as a site of coercion and regimentation and the family as a freely invented site of authentic and purely voluntary relations" (*Problem* 129). The goal of Wages for Housework was not for women to be recognized as productive workers, but rather to undermine the economic system that structures family as well as work, as Silvia Federici claims:

> It remains to be clarified that by saying that the work we perform in the home is capitalist production, we are not expressing a wish to be legitimated as part of the "productive forces" . . . Ultimately, when we say that we produce capital, we say that we can and want to destroy it, rather than engage in a losing battle to move from one form and degree of exploitation to another. ("Counterplanning" 32)

Wages for Housework must be understood as a constructive, future-oriented project, as Federici makes clear: "We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create our sexuality, which we have never known" ("Wages" 20). In focusing on the

work of care, Hartsock and Federici are invested not only in bringing attention to women's work, but also in calling into being a feminist identity that does not yet exist.

Audre Lorde's writing is also frequently linked to the elaboration of identity, but I argue that this writing also demonstrates how care is world-making. Lorde argues that the work of care, for a black lesbian mother in America in the 1980s, is a process of transforming her anger, thereby teaching her children to do the same: "It was not restraint I had to learn, but ways to use my rage to fuel actions, actions that could alter the very circumstances of oppression feeding my rage" (43). Lorde calls this process of learning how to mother under white supremacy, heterosexism, and sexism "self-possession" (44). In chapter 2, I consider how black feminist visions of self-possession complicate neoliberal narratives of self-sovereignty. Crucially, Lorde's concept of self-possession is forged in politics: in the racial, economic, and sexual politics of the 1980s, and in the pleasures of caring for black children in this context. The self-possession outlined in black feminist writing exists in a necessary relation to difference and care, and therefore the "self" itself is transformed. As Federici insists that Wages for Housework be understood not primarily as a demand for recognition, but rather as an attempt to reorganize social life, Lorde's writing, while elaborating overlapping identities (black lesbian mother), also redescribes the world.

The last decade has been another watershed moment for literature of motherhood. Contemporary writing on motherhood registers the gap between a supposedly "postfeminist" present, in which "feminism is understood to have achieved its primary goals of equality in the West" (Hemmings 7), and the unequally distributed work of childcare. This literature also responds to the increased privatization of life and care since the 1970s. Here, I follow the Endnotes Collective's insistence that "public" and "private" be understood not as distinguishing the home from the rest of (social-political-economic) life, but rather as denoting *political* and

economic, respectively. As Endnotes points out, as capitalism develops, "the private sphere becomes increasingly diffuse, rendering the home only one amongst many moments of 'the economic' or 'the private' . . . in the modern capitalist era, the scope of private exploitation spans the entire social landscape" (2013). Endnotes builds on the important work done by Wages for Housework feminists. While these feminists made the point that the so-called "private" home is in fact embedded in political economy, Endnotes makes the related but inverse argument that "the private" has taken over more of life in the last fifty years. Endnotes considers how gender inequality persists after formal equality has been granted, finding that the female gender continues to signify care: that "biological reproduction . . . becomes the burden of those whose cost it is assigned to—regardless of whether they can or will have children." Employers understand that in a society that almost entirely privatizes care, women must care for their children or pay another person (usually a woman) to do it. As novels like Walker's *Meridian* and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* recognize, motherhood constructs all women, whether it is embraced or refused—whether, indeed, it is even biologically possible. In response to what Endnotes describes as the diffusion of the private sphere across "the entire social landscape," and in the face of ongoing crisis—financial and ecological crisis, popular uprisings and crises of governance—contemporary writers of both theoretical and imaginative literature are pointing to how work thought of as "private," like motherhood, in fact structures public life.

What Happened to Motherhood?

Why, fifty years after 1970s feminist analyses of reproductive work, does motherhood remain so difficult to talk about? First, discussions of motherhood receded in academic feminism. In the 1980s and 1990s, poststructuralist and queer feminism complicated discussions of

embodiment, sex, and gender. By suggesting that the roles we occupy are not fixed and that language structures reality, poststructuralist and queer feminism generated valuable possibilities for thinking about sexual difference, and all social difference, in new ways. For example, arguing against the distinction between gender (a social construct) and sex (a biological fact), Judith Butler claims rather that sex itself "is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through forcible reiteration of those norms" (*Bodies* xii). As Eva Cherniavsky points out, however, these productive challenges within feminism resulted in "less a rescripting than a nervous evasion of the bourgeois maternal body that had been, up until that point, central to Anglo-American and French feminisms alike" (viii). While 1970s concepts of motherhood were imperfect, they provided ways of thinking about the mother's body not (only) as it relates to her children, but as it generates subjectivity.

Marianne Hirsch, writing in 1989 about the lack of developed maternal subjectivity, *even* in feminist literature, notes that "the perspective of the maternal makes it difficult simply to reject the notion of biology and forces us to engage both the meaning of the body and the risks of what has been characterized as essentialist" (12). As a result, according to Hirsch, motherhood has remained something of a problem, even in feminist theory. Along similar lines, Hartsock claims that because of biological reproduction, "the division of labor between women and men cannot be reduced to simply social dimensions," and that it is therefore necessary for feminists "to keep hold of the bodily aspect of existence, perhaps to grasp it overfirmly in an effort to keep it from evaporating altogether" (293). As part of a larger argument about how American cultural narratives of "coolness," privileging opposition and non-normativity, set themselves against women and especially mothers, Susan Fraiman argues that queer and feminist theory in the

1990s demonstrates "antagonism to a form of constraint figured as maternal" (122). Writing in 2003, Fraiman claims that contemporary feminism has "shift[ed] away from 'women' . . . both because a queer theory skeptical of identity categories has succeeded and in many ways superseded feminist theory and because the newest generation of feminist theorists has in common with queer theorists . . . a particular wariness of 1980s-style 'woman-identified' feminism" (122-23). Noting that the productive tension between the impulses to disrupt identity categories and to strategically claim identity has "go[ne] slack," Fraiman claims that "this is a poststructuralism reinvented for the Katie Roiphe generation, who came of age the morning after feminism and who fail to appreciate both the intractability of lived gender categories and their practical value in mobilizing on behalf of women" (128). I situate this project in relation to this post-feminist moment, which helps explain why, as I discuss later, someone like Rachel Cusk finds the intractability of both gender and biological sex in motherhood to be such a shock. If, as Fraiman suggests, motherhood has been figured as "constraint," even in feminist and queer theory, what possibilities might arise if we thought about motherhood otherwise? If motherhood, with its constraints and pleasures, generated ways of being rather than impinging on the rest of life, how might we think about subjectivity differently?

While academic feminism disagreed over the status of the body, a robust, well-orchestrated backlash to feminism was underway. One site of this backlash was the rise of the pro-life movement, which, after losing the legal battle over abortion with Roe v. Wade, arguably won the rhetorical war, setting the terms for popular discussions of abortion by shifting the focus to the rights of the "unborn."[11] After Evangelical Christians joined what was originally a small, Catholic movement, the pro-life movement became *the* issue around which other right-wing

[11] As Valerie Hartouni points out, this argument converged nicely with advancements in fetal imaging technology that purportedly demonstrated the "truth" of fetal personhood (3).

causes organized, as Rosalind Petchesky points out. Writing in 1981, Petchesky argues that the New Right's opposition to abortion must be understood as part of a broader articulation of a concept of "privatism," by which the privacy of the family is invoked in order to reassert patriarchal power over women and children. While feminism "demystifies the category of privacy itself," right-wing privatism used antiabortion politics to mobilize opposition to a set of liberal initiatives, such as sex education, busing, and federally-funded domestic violence shelters (223). Privatism legitimizes deregulation and corporatism—according to Petchesky, it is "spoken on behalf of *corporate* bodies rather than individuals"—while purporting to defend individual rights and "the family" (224). As I discuss in chapter 2, proponents of privatization have always taken an interest in the family, seeking to convince Americans that care should come not from the state, but from the members of one's household.

The construction of the fetus as a subject converged with other reactionary tides of the 1980s and 1990s, like the rising dehumanization of poor people of color in the United States. Laura Briggs points to the proliferation of media coverage of fetal alcohol syndrome and "crack babies" in the 1980s and 90s, with the former initially rhetorically attached to Native American communities and the latter to black Americans. Later, women were policed along class lines, as well, with middle-class white women being an additional population "at risk" of poisoning their fetuses with alcohol (52-53). Though later studies determined that even among alcoholic women, fetal alcohol syndrome was very rare, and that many Native American babies diagnosed with FAS instead had other developmental disabilities like Down Syndrome (Briggs 53-54), anxiety about FAS caused National Institutes of Health guidelines for pregnant women to shift dramatically between 1977 and 1981, from two drinks a day to zero (Seiler 623). In 2016, the CDC advised complete abstinence from alcohol for all women who are pregnant, trying to

conceive, or "sexually active with a male partner and not using birth control" (Seiler 623-24). Though there is some evidence that "fetal alcohol spectrum disorders," which includes less severe outcomes than FAS, *may* arise when mothers have eight or more drinks per week, the official recommendation remains zero (Seiler 623). During the height of this panic, two waiters were fired after counseling a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy against ordering a (single) alcoholic drink; the waiters appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, where "many members of the audience indicated their strong support for [their] action" (Bordo 82). The National Association for Pregnant Women reported 413 cases between 1973 and 2005 of women "subjected to arrest, detention, or forced medical interventions because of behavior during pregnancy" (actual figures are almost definitely higher). Over half of these women were black (Seiler 625).

"Crack baby" and FAS narratives converged with the vilification of so-called "welfare queens," a term coined in the 1970s and applied to "Black mothers already stereotyped as lazy, irresponsible, and overly fertile" (Roberts 207). U.S. lawmakers used this stereotype of the scheming, parasitic black mother to mobilize Americans, even those who received public assistance, against welfare. Briggs notes that

> "crack babies" and FAS provided a cover story for neoliberal decimation of the social contract between the state and its most vulnerable citizens, by producing a case for the belief that personal, private irresponsibility was illegitimately making outrageous claims on the public purse. It insisted that fetuses needed to be protected from dangerous mothers who would kill them. (53)

Though Briggs does not discuss the pro-life movement, the "dangerous mothers who would kill them" evokes the increasingly militant tactics of Operation Rescue, founded in 1986, which pioneered abortion-clinic protests and blockades, and the Pro-Life Action Network, which

advocated violence in the struggle against abortion. Joe Scheidler, a founder of PLAN, urged activists to end abortion "by any means necessary" ("NOW vs. Scheidler" 1), oddly invoking (or not, depending on his audience) a history of black radicalism, and in the twenty years after the formation of these organizations, there were "153 assaults, 383 death threats, 3 kidnappings, and 18 attempted murders" of abortion providers, and nine providers were murdered (Holland). While acknowledging the distinct way that mothers of color are disparaged, I want to point to a consonant logic in the discussion of pregnant women who use drugs, who want a glass of wine in their third trimester, or who want an abortion: they are all, to some extent, "dangerous mothers" from whom fetuses need protection.

Though I do not accuse feminists who are critical of 1970s feminism of collaborating with overtly antifeminist narratives, I do think that one-dimensional depictions of radical feminists *within* academic feminism have converged, unfortunately, with cruder, mainstream derision of feminism. Clare Hemmings identifies three common ways that feminism narrates its own history, one of which, the "progress" narrative, assumes that feminists "have moved from a time when we knew no better, a time when we thought 'woman' could be the subject and object of liberation, to a more knowing time in which we attend to the complexity of local and transnational formations of gender and its intersections with other vectors of power" (34). While some 1970s feminism was overly reductive, taking pains to "prove," for example, that sex was the primary, original category of oppression,[12] the theory produced in this decade was much more complex than is now remembered. As Susan Bordo points out, a leaflet distributed at the first large-scale action of the "second wave," the "No More Miss America" demonstration of 1968, "outlined a

[12] Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* argues that "*racism is sexism extended*" (122). Though Firestone's analysis of race relations in America is unsubtle, I agree with Kathi Weeks that contemporary feminists underestimate Firestone, particularly her critique of the nuclear family and her call for non-familial households (Weeks 750-51; Firestone 260-69).

complex, nonreductionist analysis of the intersection of sexism, conformism, competition, ageism, racism, militarism, and consumer culture as they are constellated and crystallized in the pageant" (19). For example, the document notes that in over forty years, no "Black . . . Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian . . . Mexican-American, or American Indian" woman has ever won the contest and that "last year [Miss America] went to Vietnam to pep-talk our husbands, fathers, sons and boyfriends into dying and killing with a better spirit" ("No More" 586). This is the event at which bra-burning was (falsely) rumored to have taken place: from a complex analysis of the interlocking oppressions of a racist, sexist, capitalist, militaristic state, the popular media constructed a debate about clothing.

I am not sure that some academic feminist depictions of radical (or "second wave") feminism have been much kinder.[13] Jack Halberstam claims that "second-wave feminism . . . relied on universals like 'women-born-women' and accused trans women of trying to infiltrate women-only space" (326-27). Finn Enke summarizes this discrediting impulse as follows: "In less than one generation, the 'second wave' became aka 'white feminism' and 'transexclusionary feminism,' and now, 1970s feminists is often used as a shorthand genealogy of today's racist and trans-exclusionary feminists (TERFs)" (10). Enke argues that "if we write off '1970s feminism,' we lose feminism's deeply questioning, queer, coalitional and anti-imperialist past; we miss some relevant grappling of that era, and the way that the grappling itself offers useful lessons" (10). Of course, some 1970s and 1980s feminists explicitly and implicitly excluded trans women; the musician Beth Elliott and the queer activist Sylvia Rivera were both forced off stages by feminists in 1973, at the West Coast Lesbian Conference and the Christopher Street Liberation Day in New York City, respectively, because they were trans (Enke 12). Another commonly-

[13] In this dissertation, I avoid using the term "second-wave feminism," which tends to be used in the context of flattening the distinctions among feminists between the late 1960s and the 1980s.

referenced artifact of trans-exclusionary feminism is the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest), which was open only to "womyn-born-womyn."[14] But dismissing 1970s feminism as white and straight ignores the work done by queer and of color women in this decade, and it ignores the (imperfect) attempts of white/straight feminists to think through difference.

Similarly, attention to experiences of motherhood, both embraced and refused, in black feminist texts demonstrates that black feminism was not a "reaction" to the women's movement, but rather "a parallel development," as Kimberly Springer argues (3-4). Though black feminist writers have often been driven by the knowledge that the women's movement does not take their experiences into account, understanding black feminism as a *demand* (on "white feminism") risks underestimating the black feminist project. Noting that "women's studies has long constructed black feminism as a form of discipline inflicted on the field and has imagined black feminists as a set of disciplinarians," Jennifer Nash argues that once the "demand" is met, "black feminism is imagined as no longer necessary or vital" (*Black Feminism* 13). In particular, Nash studies how intersectionality circulates in academic feminism and in the contemporary university. In women's studies, intersectionality is imagined as either in the past, "its identitarian commitments . . . questioned," or "as feminism's future," wherein "intersectionality sheds black women in a postracial feminism" ("Institutionalizing" 46). In the broader university, Nash argues, intersectionality is more often conflated with diversity, which erases the fact that "diversity is a project of including bodies," while "intersectionality is an antisubordination project" (*Black Feminism* 24). In this dissertation, I focus on black feminist writing from the 1970s and 1980s in order to emphasize black feminism "as an autonomous intellectual and political tradition" rather than a "critique" (Nash, *Black Feminism* 16). I also present black

[14] Elizabeth Currans points out that "[t]ransgression of gender norms was both embraced and rejected at MichFest, but contemporary narratives about it stress its exclusionary practices" (460).

feminist theories of motherhood that diverge from what Nash calls "the 'revolutionary mothering' discourse," which "obsessively track[s] motherhood as a site of spiritual and psychic renewal and steadfastly refuse[s] to document the violence of motherhood apart from the threat of state violence" ("Political Life" 711). Nash locates this discourse in the present, but as I discuss in chapter 2, scholars in the 1980s idealized black motherhood as well. I argue that the impulse to distinguish black maternal experiences from white, "ambivalent" motherhood has, at times, erased black feminist critiques of the nuclear family and patriarchal motherhood.

If the "daring and ambition" of 1970s and 1980s feminist theory is transformed in feminist memory to "naiveté and failure" (Weeks, "Vanishing *Dialectic*" 735), we risk missing perceptive analyses of motherhood from these years. For one thing, feminist literature and theory from this earlier period recognized that motherhood threatens notions of "gender equality"—and this insight is again at the fore in contemporary writing about motherhood. As Hemmings points out, governments and transnational organizations frequently claim to promote "gender equality" in international funding, implying that women and men are equal in "the West" and non-Western cultures must be brought up to speed (8). Significantly, "feminism itself, insofar as it is assumed to be over in the West, does not need to be exported, only the equality that one needs to take care to ensure does not go too far" (9). Among liberals (and conservatives) with misgivings about progressive movements, like queer and trans activism, Black Lives Matter, or feminism, it is safer to advocate "equality" than to support these movements by name. Equality, when understood in legal terms, might already be here. Legal equality does not threaten capitalism, nor does it alter the distribution of reproductive labor. But motherhood proves such "equality"-based notions of justice to be empty. As Rachel Cusk points out, motherhood makes a mockery of gender equality: "If women experience equality only from the outside, in the form of their

freedom to pursue male values, the intransigence of biological identity comes as a surprise" ("Shattered"). The unequally distributed labor of motherhood demonstrates that "gender equality," if measured by, say, admission to professional fields, is empty. "Gender equality" that ignores who does care work, and how, is no equality at all.

As I discuss in chapter 3, Cusk's writing elaborates a feminist imaginary that emerges from the work of care. It insists that any vision of reality that ignores care (such as the claim that gender equality has been achieved) is false and that women must construct their own reality that acknowledges the work of care: that acknowledges what it is to be a woman. Though Cusk's writing suggests that the need for a feminist reality was not driven home for her until after she became a mother, other writing considered in this dissertation demonstrates that even women who refuse motherhood are structured by it; they, too, know that their sense of what is real must emerge from the question of motherhood. In Cusk's account, motherhood makes clear to women that they are not men; they are not "equal." But being "women" may not be so easy, either: "To act as a mother, I had to suspend my own character, which had evolved on a diet of male values. . . . And yet this cult, motherhood, was not a place where I could actually live. It reflected nothing about me: its literature and practices, its values, its codes of conduct, its aesthetic were not mine" (*Aftermath* 19).

If, as Cusk implies and as the philosophy of Irigaray makes clear, motherhood has been defined by patriarchy, then a feminist elaboration of motherhood would generate new political possibilities. Motherhood raises crucial questions about relation and autonomy, independence and interdependency. Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey trace how, after the student protests of 1968, demands for liberation became incorporated into "an extreme form of liberalism" and, at times, libertarianism, which "tended to ignore the possibility of collective action" (231-32).

This post-1970s liberalism (which we might call neoliberalism), claiming to emphasize "autonomy" and "self-actualization" above all else, permeated psychological models of parenting, so that the "sensitive mother" was defined as the one who maintains control of her child without seeming to. As Walkerdine and Lucey summarize such models (which continue to be dominant today): "disciplining is considered potentially harmful, because feelings of powerlessness and humiliation will result, if the disciplining is not achieved by creating an illusion of choice where the child thinks that it is the agent of its own free will" (230).

In this way, motherhood "uphold[s] a fiction of autonomy" which "is central to the travesty of the word 'freedom' embodied in a political system that has to have everyone imagining they are free the better to regulate them" (232). Mothers are responsible, in other words, for encouraging their children to believe themselves free precisely when they are not (that is, as small children). In Walkerdine and Lucey's analysis, motherhood after 1970 comes into focus as an institution that, paradoxically, encourages people to believe that they are independent. Mothering is deemed successful insofar as it produces an independent person. Motherhood is deemed successful, in other words, to the extent that it erases itself.[15] Freud theorized psychosexual development through the different responses of men and women to the necessary separation from the mother, and whether Freud's theory acknowledges patriarchy or reifies it, it is notable that the mother, in this theory, serves as background to a subject coming into being. The result of this, Irigaray writes, is that "the maternal-feminine remains the *place*

[15] Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum discuss the expectation that sons separate from their mothers and the belief, particularly in America, that a man's emotional closeness or co-habitation with his mother after a certain age is a sign of poor adjustment. Silverstein and Rashbaum point out that this expectation converges, at various points in history, with resurgences of anti-feminism, as in the men's movement of the 1990s, galvanized by the poet Robert Bly's call for a "clean break from the mother" in his best-selling 1990 book, *Iron John* (Silverstein and Rashbaum 346).

separated from 'its' own place, deprived of 'its' place. She is or ceaselessly becomes the place of the other who cannot separate himself from it" (*An Ethics* 10).

Motherhood highlights the fact that no one is self-made. This insight has been neutralized through constructions of motherhood as natural; if motherhood is women's destiny, then the mother's making of another person, during and after pregnancy, can be glossed over, absorbed into her identity. Thus, we lose several truths that are threatening to white-supremacist, liberal-capitalist patriarchy: we create each other; world-making happens through care work; much of this care work is unpaid; and when it is paid, it is often done by women of color and severely underpaid. A feminist motherhood, on the other hand, starts from the understanding that acts of care create the world, and accordingly, it defines freedom not as independence, but rather as interdependency. The vision of freedom generated from literature of motherhood is embodied and non-sovereign; it emerges from embodied relations of care (which are not limited to but certainly include biological reproduction), and it rejects the model of the self-governing individual, which motherhood proves impossible. Sovereignty, implying both self-ownership and self-actualization—no one can infringe upon one's rights or body, and one's life is self-directed above all—does not describe mothers, who, to various extents, respond to the needs of their children. It also fails to describe people who have been mothered (that is, all people, even if only at birth), and this second truth partially accounts for the antipathy towards mothers: they reveal strict individualism to be incoherent. Therefore, as important as it is that motherhood *not* be compulsory, framing it as a choice does not capture the way that women are subjected by motherhood. As I discuss in chapter 2, women who refuse motherhood are also shaped by it in a way that makes "choice" an insufficient framework for the question of reproduction. The ideal of sovereignty is also used to justify cuts to social services, which further privatize care into the

nuclear family. As Melinda Cooper points out, architects of neoliberalism were well-aware that their vision of rugged "individualism" in fact required a family (57). Sovereignty is a fiction that denies care, and so feminist freedom, emerging from the question of reproduction, must insist on non-sovereignty. What visions of individual and social life are possible if we start from non-sovereign care?

Feminist Freedom

Herbert Marcuse claims that "the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*" (*Aesthetic* 9). The theory and literature I consider in this dissertation understands that feminism's project is not to achieve recognition within existing frameworks, but rather to redefine reality. In Toni Cade Bambara's essay, "On the Issue of Roles," the frameworks to be discarded are "white models or white interpretations of non-white models": "Perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch" (133). Bambara calls for the rejection of reality as it has been defined by white supremacy, which has painfully separated black men and women, arguing that it is time to "submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood (or reject them out of hand if you're not squeamish about being called 'neuter') until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to Blackhood" (134). Her perspective is thus distinct from Irigaray's, who claims that reality has been defined by patriarchy, in a denial of sexual (rather than racial) difference. I do not wish to downplay this important difference, but I also want to point out that both theorists issue ontological challenges to reality. Bambara insists that this is a long-term project:

> It may be lonely. Certainly painful. It'll take time. We've got time. . . . We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships. . . . Running off to mimeograph a fuck-whitey leaflet, leaving your mate to brood, is not revolutionary. Hopping a plane to rap someone else's "community" while your son struggles alone with the Junior Scholastic assignment on "The Dark Continent" is not revolutionary. (134)

The revolutionary redefinition of reality starts from acts of care and demands a new way of thinking not only about the self, but also about the relations between the self and others. In the context of the essay's concern with misogyny in the black liberation movement, it is likely that Bambara addresses black men in the last two sentences above, but the work of fashioning revolutionary selves, lives, and relationships is everyone's. Attention to care would change the way we think about revolution.

Literature of motherhood enacts and encourages a new kind of attention to pleasure, embodied acts of care, and the relationship between self and world. If, as the question of reproduction demonstrates, we are not sovereign entities, then a different definition of freedom is needed. The literature I consider, which "re-presents reality while accusing it" (Marcuse, *Aesthetic* 8), elaborates freedom through embodied, interdependent relations of care. This freedom takes shape in the world, with others. Hannah Arendt asserts that philosophical theorizations of freedom have "distorted, instead of clarifying, the very idea of freedom such as it is given in human experience by transposing it from its original field, the realm of politics and human affairs in general, to an inward domain, the will, where it would be open to self-inspection" (145). This movement from political, social freedom, freedom as action, to freedom as "sovereignty, the ideal of a free will" (163) has led to unfreedom, as political actors pursue

sovereignty for some (at the expense of others' freedom) or sovereignty for all (impossible). "If men wish to be free," Arendt writes, "it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce" (165). Along similar lines, Elizabeth Grosz's concern with "what the female—or feminist—subject is and is capable of making and doing" rather than what limits this subject leads her to a Bergsonian concept of freedom as "not a quality or property of the human subject, as implied within the phenomenological tradition," but rather as "a process, an action, a movement that has no particular qualities" ("Feminism" 147). Like Arendt, Grosz claims that freedom makes no sense as a property or trait of an individual and must be located, instead, in a dynamic world.

If freedom is assumed to be sovereignty, then it is hard to perceive the more capacious vision of freedom emerging from literature of motherhood. As Irigaray insists, "A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic" (*An Ethics* 6). The literature in this dissertation recognizes that enacting feminist freedom is a project of the senses. Significantly, Irigaray claims that the failure to recognize sexual difference is a sensory problem:

> It is surely a question of the dissociation of body and soul, of sexuality and spirituality … Everything is constructed in such a way that these realities remain separate, even opposed to one another. … Their wedding is always being put off to a beyond, a future life, or else devalued, felt and thought to be less worthy in comparison to the marriage between the mind and God in a transcendental realm where all ties to the world of sensation have been severed. (*An Ethics* 15)

As Irigaray's work makes clear, feminism requires not merely the reintegration of "body and soul," but also a *new kind* of attention to "the world of sensation." According to Grosz,

"Irigaray's project is nothing short of the elaboration of a new understanding of the real, a new conception of the dynamic forces of the universe itself, half of which have been hidden and covered over by the other half" (*Becoming* 100). Literature is well-suited to this project, as it contests "the monopoly of established reality," as Marcuse claims. Literature articulates questions which confound categories and concepts for which we do not yet have language: "The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions" (*Aesthetic* 7).

The elaboration of feminist sensation is required in this project, and the texts I consider approach freedom through new articulations of the body and sensory experience. As I discuss in chapter 4, Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic demonstrates how women's pleasure leads to a new understanding of the world and new relations of care. Literature of motherhood demonstrates not only that mothers (and therefore women) are other than they have been described, but that the world itself is other than it has been assumed to be. Grosz argues that Charles Darwin's vision of nature, his radical break with "the Newtonian universe" is useful for feminism and for all progressive political projects because it emphasizes difference and "indeterminacy": "life can be life only because the universe, at least as far as the living are concerned, is where it is never fully at home, where it can never remain stable, where it must undergo change … life is always challenged to overcome itself, to invent new methods, regions, tactics, and goals, to differ from itself" (*Nick* 9). Life "differ[s] from itself" as bodies are "other than themselves," as Grosz argues elsewhere: "Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment" (*Volatile* 209). In the texts in this dissertation, embodiment is a process, not a finished thing. Along similar lines, Rosi Braidotti argues that feminist theory's focus on embodiment is anti-essentialist because "the subject 'woman' is not a monolithic essence,

defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, determined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference" (25). Therefore, though I trace in motherhood literature the insight that sexual difference matters, that avoiding discussions of the body is dangerous for mothers and non-mothers, it is a transforming body, one that is coming into being: "Sexual difference is the principle of radical difference, the failure of identity, destination, of finality. It is the eruption of the new, the condition of emergence, evolution, or overcoming" (Grosz, *Becoming* 103).

While Grosz's concepts of sexual difference and freedom are central to this project, she does not discuss motherhood or care directly. This dissertation thus proposes that non-sovereign, embodied, feminist freedom might respond to the "mythic snare" of the mother described by Rachel Cusk: "When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them" (*Life's Work* 7). How might literature of motherhood alter the terms of "being oneself" enough to free women from this double bind?

In this dissertation, I use the word "women" to refer to mothers. While I risk excluding a trans man who bears a child, perhaps (but not necessarily) identifying as a "mother," I remain convinced that the category of women has political utility. When I refer to "women," I invoke a history of political struggle around sexuality and reproduction. As Wendy Brown points out, the feminist projects to disarticulate sexuality from reproduction and to resignify women as participants in social, political, and economic life are distinct from the trans projects to "separate sex from gender once and for all" and to "emancipate [gender] from a given physiology presumed determinate and determining." Brown claims, "if both are vital projects of resignification, they're not clearly assimilable to one another." Therefore, while Sophie Lewis

uses the term "pregnant people" in her study of surrogacy, I wish to demonstrate with my use of the word "women" that women and mothers are constructed in overlapping ways. "Pregnant people," in my view, risks eliding the misogyny that permeates discussions of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. This misogyny has stark consequences for everything from prenatal health care, abortion access, and maternal mortality rates to (as I discuss in this dissertation) how we define "freedom." Though many of my primary literary texts pertain to biological reproduction, when I use the word women, I refer to all women, not only those who can bear children. As I discuss in chapter 3, the expectation that a woman will become a mother structures all women's lives, including trans women and infertile cis-women.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 considers care work, artistic work, illness, and embodiment in the writings of Bernadette Mayer and Anne Boyer. I read Mayer's book-length poem, *Midwinter Day* (1982), and her collection, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, written in 1980 but not published until 1994 (Browne 10), alongside Boyer's more recent works: the poetry collection *Garments Against Women* (2015), the essay collection *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (2017), and her 2019 memoir, *The Undying*. Both writers insist that art and care work need not be in competition with each other, and they reject austerity through their emphasis on labors of care. Mayer and Boyer also ask how literary form highlights or obscures the world-making properties of care; both criticize forms that claim to represent reality while occluding it. Boyer's sharp critique of cancer memoirs raises the question: how do we talk about our experiences, particularly an experience of surviving cancer, without being absorbed into the calcified

narratives that we wish to disrupt? How can literature attend to care rather than shore up the self-sufficient individual?

In chapter 2, I discuss how 1970s and 1980s black feminist texts think about care after the Civil Rights movement. In these texts, which include Alice Walker's 1976 novel, *Meridian*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and Audre Lorde's essays and journal entries from the 1980s, care is firmly located outside the nuclear family. These texts recognize that while the home can be a place of healing for people of color, the family has been used to justify the privatization of care. Whether they embrace or refuse motherhood itself, these texts reject the privilege of maternity that attaches to white, patriarchal gender, offering instead a vision of social care. This literature also insists that subjectivity arises from the body, and it envisions embodiment as relational while aiming for bodily autonomy. Therefore, these texts articulate a notion of "self-possession" that is non-sovereign, anti-austerity, and intersubjective, contesting the self-governance of neoliberalism.

In chapter 3, I consider how the writing of Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti generates a feminist imaginary oriented around openness and possibility rather than choice. Cusk's trilogy of novels, *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016), and *Kudos* (2018), and her 2001 memoir, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, propose that reality itself has been defined by "male values," and that feminist freedom requires an artistic redescription of reality. I argue that *A Life's Work* poses a question about embodied maternal subjectivity that the trilogy answers by articulating freedom *through* compromised, embodied subjectivity. Along similar lines, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, misread by some critics as a memoir about the decision not to have a child, in fact reorients the question of motherhood around possibility rather than choice. In its formal and conceptual engagement with openness, chance, and change, the novel theorizes a form of freedom that is

tied to indeterminacy rather than sovereignty. This notion of freedom, emerging from the question of reproduction, is more generative than freedom that has reproductive choice as its horizon.

Chapter 4 discusses Octavia Butler's novel, *Wild Seed* (1980), and Maggie Nelson's memoir, *The Argonauts* (2015). This is the most unlikely pairing of the dissertation, and though these books vary greatly in style, genre, and content, reading them together demonstrates how visions of embodied transformation lead to new concepts of pleasure, including sexual pleasure, in motherhood. I consider the stakes in Butler's present for thinking about black women's pleasure, including sexual pleasure, through a transforming body. While *Wild Seed* suggests that pleasure leads to social transformation, I argue that the form and style of *The Argonauts* prevent a social meaning of pleasure from emerging. Finally, I connect the issue of sensory transformation to the question of literary form, discussing how form and style work politically.

I wrote most of this dissertation during the Covid-19 pandemic, when mothers found themselves especially overburdened. Those who could work from home were parenting and working, impossibly, at the same time, while essential-worker mothers faced the stark dilemma of what to do with their children while schools were closed. By February 2021, 2.5 million American women had left the workforce since the beginning of the pandemic, as compared to 1.8 million men (Rogers). That month, *The New York Times* published a multimedia report, *The Primal Scream Project*, that featured audio excerpts from recorded messages left by mothers on a "primal scream line." Many women called from the bathroom or closet, the only places in their homes where they could be alone. One woman said, "This pandemic has made me realize that maybe I'm not cut out to be a mother. I love my kids, but I don't like being a mom. And I don't like being a mom in America, because it's just so much more clear that America hates women

and hates families. We don't have support" ("Agony"). Mothers could not possibly be an afterthought (even, or especially, during a global pandemic) in a society that acknowledged care as central rather than peripheral and that understood freedom accordingly, as interdependent and caring. Literature of motherhood begins to define this freedom.

Chapter 1

The Aesthetics of Care

In 1969, the New York artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!: Proposal for an exhibition "CARE."* The document imagines an art exhibition showcasing maintenance work, broadly defined; for example, the artist would live in the museum with her husband and baby, cooking and cleaning; waged maintenance workers (including librarian, construction worker, and nurse) would be interviewed; and samples of waste, including garbage and water from "the polluted Hudson River" would be delivered daily to the museum and "purified, de-polluted, rehabilitated, recycled, and conserved" by the artist or technicians. In describing and defining Maintenance Art, the first part of the manifesto identifies a problem in contemporary art and one common to avant-gardes: the disavowal of care and repetition in artistic movements characterized by newness. Ukeles identifies two related dichotomies, the death and life instincts, and two basic systems, development and maintenance. The "Death Instinct," characterized by "separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence" is set against the "Life Instinct," defined by "unification," "survival systems and operations," and "the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species." Ukeles aims to undo the distinction between art and care, private inspiration and public reception, especially in the context of the avant-garde of 1960s America:

> Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials.
>
> Conceptual & Process art, especially, claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.

> The exhibition of Maintenance Art, "CARE," would zero in on pure maintenance, exhibit it as contemporary art, and yield, by utter opposition, clarity of issues. (235)

The exhibition of various forms of care work as art would allow viewers to see the categories of maintenance and art as thoroughly intertwined. The *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, poised as it is between the initiation of and subsequent work to extend and maintain various liberation movements in America, dramatizes one of the fundamental tensions of progressive or radical world-making. In politics and art, how does one balance the constructive work of change with the care required to reproduce this work? How, moreover, to see reproductive work as not supportive of but rather at the heart of revolutionary world-making?

Ukeles's maintenance art, which also took the form of her doing janitorial and landscaping tasks at museums, was inspired by the experience of having child, after which, Ukeles recounts, "People stopped asking me questions, stopped thinking of me as anything other than a mother" (Kennedy). She asserts, "I didn't want to be two separate people—the maintenance worker and the free artist—living in one body. . . . If I am the boss of my boundless freedom, then I call necessity art. I name Maintenance—Art" (Queens Museum). I read this conditional statement as somewhere between cynical and aspirational: Ukeles knows she is not the boss of her boundless freedom, but the act of naming is sincere. Ukeles identifies a way to freedom that does not go around care work but rather through it. Furthermore, like the writers I consider in this dissertation, Ukeles notes a crucial connection between financial crisis, gender, and care work. Of her work with the Department of Sanitation, Ukeles writes, "I entered maintenance heaven at the time of the maintenance hell of the NYC fiscal crisis of the 1970s: the housekeepers of the city-as-home" (Queens Museum). Ukeles's decision to work with (mostly male) sanitation workers registers how class and race, in addition to gender, function in work's

differential valuation.[16] It also recalls Martin Luther King, Jr.'s late-life work with striking sanitation workers in Memphis as part of his Poor People's Campaign. Ukeles's work with the sanitation department acknowledges that care work is not only gendered, but racialized, and that naming this work as art would challenge the racial, gender, and class hierarchies that structure the category of art.

This chapter considers how the poems and essays of Bernadette Mayer and Anne Boyer, like Ukeles's art, formulate an aesthetics of care. Beginning in the 1970s, many feminist poets foregrounded in their writing the relationship between reproductive and artistic work, and poet-theorists like Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich drew attention to such inquiries. What interests me particularly about Mayer and Boyer is their unremitting attention to form. In order to see care differently, Mayer and Boyer insist, a new kind of poetry (or prose) must be made. Mayer, who began publishing in the late 1960s and whose most recent book came out in 2016, writes poems that do not shy away from the ordinary, including apparently straightforward discursive or concrete sections, such as lists.[17] Maggie Nelson claims that Mayer's books, *Midwinter Day* and *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, "occupy a privileged place in the history of American feminist poetics in that they represent one of the first sustained attempts to fold the 'women's work' of bearing children into the fabric of an experimental lyricism stretched to book-length proportions" (109). As Bronwen Tate argues, Mayer's experimental poetic attention

[16] Ukeles created an unpaid position of resident artist in New York City's Department of Sanitation, and between 1979 and 1980 she completed the project, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, in which she shook the hands of all 8,500 sanitation workers while saying, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive" (Queens Museum).

[17] A few examples of Mayer's lists are the poem, "Some of This Decade's Things," which contains lines like, "train to Baltimore spoon with holes bread knife stanza xii" (*Utopia* 58-59); the list of all the businesses and municipal buildings in the town center of Lenox, Massachusetts (*Midwinter Day* 49); and a list of contemporary events, objects, and concepts, both personal and public, that follows the claim, "So when I write of love I write of …" (*Midwinter Day* 90-92).

to reproductive work made her "doubly marginal": to 1970s feminist theorists who overlooked experimental writing and to experimental writers who excluded women (43).

Considering Mayer's work as adjacent to but breaking in important ways from contemporary experimental poetry makes visible the relationship of her formal experimentation to her interest in reproductive work. In an interview, Mayer questions what was new about the Language school's "poetry without meaning," stating that "the only way you can express some aspects of living would be without meaning . . . so I couldn't understand why they felt it was such a big thing" (James). As I will argue in this chapter, Mayer's commitment to putting "everything" in her poetry—mundane domestic details alongside philosophical claims, lines that resist sense-making alongside readable sections of prose—contests a notion of art as insulated from labors of care. Nelson notes that the "accumulation of" such "juxtapositions produces a peculiar effect: instead of measuring her life against the adventures of a Shackleton or a Verlaine, they simply place her 'continuous present' alongside theirs. The domestic qua the domestic is thus neither elevated nor denigrated. It is simply included, gracefully but firmly" (118). Mayer's form insists that reproductive work and art are complementary, not in competition. Anne Boyer, a contemporary poet just beginning to receive critical attention, shares with Mayer an interest in form that is entwined with a concern for motherhood and care work. In this chapter, I read Mayer's book-length poem, *Midwinter Day* (1982), and her collection of prose poems, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (composed in 1979 and 1980 but not published until 1994), which exemplify Mayer's conjoined interest in reproductive work and poetic form. I read across Anne Boyer's work, drawing from her 2015 poetry collection, *Garments Against Women*, her 2017 collection of essays, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*, and her 2019 memoir (which is also an anti-memoir), *The Undying*.

Both poets are convinced that "visibility" is not a virtue in itself, insisting that new ways of life demand new forms of description. Sam Huber distinguishes Boyer's critique of poetry from more traditional observations of poetry's ever-receding promise of transcendence, writing that for Boyer, poetry's "unmet task [is] not to transcend reality but to transform it in the service of those whom poetry has long neglected." Boyer's work considers the problem that in reproducing existing structures of feeling, literature often forecloses on the emergence of new ones. Her poems, "Not Writing" and "What is 'Not Writing?'" explore this tension: "writing is like literature is like the world of monsters is the production of culture is I hate culture is the world of wealthy women and of men" (46). It is important to note, though, that writing is *not* literature; in that likeness is space for possible disarticulation. As Huber argues, *Garments Against Women* "stakes out a world for writing outside of the world of literature." Boyer's interest in finding a form that would not affirm culture but rather indict it bears with Herbert Marcuse's claim that "the aesthetic transformation is achieved through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature" (*Aesthetic* 8). *Garments Against Women* is dedicated, moreover, to Boyer's daughter, "who has allowed me the possibility of a literature that is not against us" (90). In the context of the collection's concerns with reproductive work (and its title), it is possible to read "us" as women, but in the context of Boyer's work more generally, the "us" reads more convincingly as everyone oppressed by what she calls, in the poem "No World but the World," "*survival-life*," or life under late capitalism—that is, most people (19).

Boyer's writing asks: if we started from the assumption that care is at the center of life, what kind of art could we make? Specifically, she considers how art can be made new without

the masculinist disavowal of care. Boyer's essay, "Toward a Provisional Avant-Garde," envisions an avant-garde *not* called "the avant-garde," which

> will share with historic avant-gardes that art will often be made in groups, but it will seek or find the artistic and literary expressions that mimic something other than war or machines or violent manly death, something like "human touch" and "comforting noises made when another is ill" and "maternal protection" and "friendly ritual" . . . and "the soft feeling of an arm" . . . (*Handbook* 130)

As I will discuss later, Boyer seeks to define culture or social life from the body itself and the relations of care between bodies. She takes Theodor Adorno's assertion about poetry's ontological claims—that it is "the experimental test" of the unfashionable "truth . . . that subject and object are not rigid, isolated poles, but can only be identified within the process in which they interact"—to its embodied end (219). In Boyer's work, this art "that is not against us" is not yet here, but it will emerge from attention to embodied acts of care.

Literary Form and Care

Boyer, Ukeles, and Mayer ask how form allows us to think about the family, care, and the body differently, and all three artists hold out hope that an art *of* care work, finding a new form for itself, might care for people. This aesthetic of care locates freedom in experiences of non-sovereign interdependency and pleasure. As Boyer writes of her proposed "avant-garde," "It will use art to find methods of delirious compensation for having survived the twentieth century. It will be 'extreme care'" (*Handbook* 131). Jacques Rancière distinguishes between the mimetic and aesthetic regimes of art as follows: while the mimetic or representative regime prioritized art's subject matter and/or form, the aesthetic, emerging in the late eighteenth century, is

concerned with a reconfiguration of the sensible (defined as what is and is not visible and to whom within a particular society).[18] For Rancière, the "distribution of the sensible" is a political question; in fact, all politics come from this question of aesthetics: who perceives what and whom, who is imperceptible, and so on. In the aesthetic regime, then, art is defined as that which intervenes in "the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, *logos* identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc." (23). The fundamental contradiction of the aesthetic regime—that it "makes art into an *autonomous form of life* and thereby sets down, at one and the same time, the autonomy of art and its identification with a moment in life's process of self-formation" (26)—has led to confusion in discussions of modernity and the avant-garde. On the one hand, the avant-garde has been imagined or theorized as "the force that marches in the lead, that has a clear understanding of the movement . . . determines the direction of historical evolution, and chooses subjective political orientations," and on the other, as "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come" (29). Rancière claims that the aesthetic regime of art, inhabiting the paradox of "autonomous life," can only be the second kind of avant-garde. The aesthetics of care in the work of Ukeles, Boyer, and Mayer remind us that life's "self-formation" is a paradox (and yet true): all things, beings, and matter are self-forming *and* formed by each other.

The intervention of art that elaborates "new sensible forms and material structures for a life to come" is especially urgent as a response to the implementation of policies of austerity,

[18] It is important to note that Rancière defines these familiar terms in a particular way. The distinction does not map neatly onto the non/representational binary; the aesthetic regime includes both representational and abstract art. The difference is that the representative regime prescribes a particular relationship between genre and subject matter, while the aesthetic regime does not (32-33).

either during acute financial crisis or more generally since the late 1970s, as part of the neoliberal attenuation of the public good. Claiming that social services are the most expendable government provisions, and therefore should be the first to be cut, a logic of austerity denies that care structures life. Life-art practices that represent care so as to defamiliarize it or make it more visible (aesthetically, in Rancière's sense) can, opposing austerity, rebuild public or communal life. As I discussed in the introduction, Endnotes points out that "in the modern capitalist era, the scope of private exploitation spans the entire social landscape," that is, both domestic and purportedly "public" space. Endnotes claims that for employers, "the female gender signifies . . . a price tag. Biological reproduction . . . becomes the burden of those whose cost it is assigned to — regardless of whether they can or will have children." The literature I consider in this chapter (and throughout this dissertation) works toward a reconfiguration of social life wherein care is not a cost, but rather locates the possibility of life itself.

In *Midwinter Day*, which takes place in Lenox, Massachusetts on the winter solstice in 1978, Mayer relates "an idea to write a book that would translate the detail of thought from the day to language like a dream transformed to read as it does, everything, a book that would end before it started in time to prove the day like the dream has everything in it" (89). Similarly, in *The Undying*, an account of being ill with breast cancer, Boyer imagines writing a book "in which nothing is not permitted" (201). Mayer also writes, in *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, "the novel is a rigid form, it's not like life like they say it is" (62). This observation occurs, crucially, between accounts of her in-laws' disapproving response to the news of her third pregnancy. The poems in *Desires*, each written as an extended prose poem-letter, addressed to an unnamed "you," often oppose the idea that motherhood and writing exist in a zero-sum relation: "the thing I resent most is when someone says you won't have time to

write if you have a family" (64). In other words, the poem encourages the reader to see certain ideas about form (the novel is sensible and "real") alongside an economy of scarcity or austerity (time spent mothering is time away from writing; having a child when you're poor is irresponsible). Both, the poem argues, are impoverished, unimaginative, even false ways of thinking.

The work of Anne Boyer, too, insists that paying attention to excess—often figured in her work as embodiment or feeling—requires a form other than the novel. The title poem of *Garments Against Women*, the last poem in the collection, ends with the lines, "a catalogue of whales that is a catalogue / of whale bones inside a catalogue of garments / against women that could never be a novel itself" (86). The echo of *Moby-Dick* in these lines gestures toward that novel's maximalism, its intentional exhaustion of categories in order to explode systems of classification, as in the cetology chapter which seeks "[t]he classification of the constituents of a chaos" (115). But Boyer's book frequently mentions sewing, and the lines also evoke a whalebone corset and thus an ambiguous relation between the garments and the women. Are the garments "against" in the sense of opposed to the women, confining their bodies, or are they against their skin, touching the women in a way that might be *for* the women? In the double meaning of "against" is the possibility that paying attention to this place where the body meets the world may yield a new realism that, rather than being structured by the cause and effect of novelistic narration, follows labors of care.

Boyer also critiques the memoir form, as I will discuss later in this chapter, stating that a genre that encourages the straightforward narration of who one is forecloses on the possibility of being otherwise. Judith Butler develops a similar point in *Senses of the Subject*, characterizing the question of subject-formation as a (gendered) problem of narration. Significantly, Butler

frames this as a question of care and touch. Reading the strange and impossible narration of infancy in *David Copperfield* as a defensive response to the non-sovereignty of being a baby, Butler writes, "Will this narrator be authored, or will he author himself?" (3). Butler draws upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work to elaborate a notion of being touched as the (impossible) inauguration of the subject. The inextricability of touching and being touched, of acting and being acted upon, implies a relationship between ethics and aesthetics: "a certain demand or obligation impinges upon me, and the response relies on my capacity to affirm this having been acted on, formed into one who can respond to this or that call. . . . something impresses itself upon me, and I develop impressions that cannot be fully separated from what acts on me" (11).

There is a paradox, therefore, in describing or narrating a self that only exists as it senses the world; for this reason, Butler claims that "we require forms of fiction to arrive at self-understanding . . . If one seeks to give an account of a condition in which series and sequence were themselves a rather stark problem, as was the distinction between active and passive, then one has to find other means or allow for narrative to bespeak its own impossibility" (16). The self, impossibly both free and dependent, resonates, therefore, with Rancière's artwork, which acts on the world yet is enmeshed in it. Boyer and Mayer's writing, which seeks to develop forms of literature that generate ethics from the body, insists on an unfixed or perhaps unknowable self and locates freedom in intersubjective (and, indeed, dependent) relations, especially relations of care.

As discussed in the introduction, the theorization of reproductive work by 1970s feminists also approached subjectivity, agency, and world-making through care, but this ontological dimension is often lost in readings that focus on the theory's demands for recognition or object to its perceived essentialism. Reading Mayer's early-1980s work with Boyer's

contemporary writing makes clear that many of the questions that feminist literature and theory asked almost fifty years ago have yet to be answered. In particular, the world-making possibilities of care work are still being elaborated. I read Boyer's and Mayer's concerns with excess in this light. Their work figures the recovery of reproductive labor not as a disclosing or a demystification, but as a generation of something more, something beyond rational-capitalist understandings of what is real or apparent: "everything."

From Austerity to Abundance

Though not obviously connected to reproductive work, Slavoj Žižek's commentary on the often-quoted line from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, "If God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted," sheds light on Mayer's and Boyer's interest in excess. Žižek cites Lacan's critique of this idea, "we analysts know full well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer," in his own development of a discussion of modern atheism as "dominated by prohibitions" (28). In his against-the-grain reading of Dostoevsky's short story, "Bobok," in which the narrator, in a cemetery, overhears conversations of the still-conscious dead who have decided "to cast aside all shame," Žižek finds not the destructive freedom of the godless, as Dostoevsky perhaps intended, but rather compulsion spurred by a continued, though unavowed, religious framework: "*the 'undead' are under the compulsive spell of an evil God*." Therefore, the story which Žižek argues is meant to dramatize most fully the idea that God's existence prevents the deterioration of social life is in fact "a projection of the repressed underside of religion itself" (33).

In *The Undying*, Boyer recalls the experience of sensing or even believing that she was dead. She later discovers that this is a cognitive effect of her chemotherapy, but she also

attributes this sense to the fact that nerves and cells are destroyed by the treatment. The title of the book, therefore, refers to survival but also to the half-death that many cancer survivors carry with them. Against the self-managing optimism of mainstream cancer narratives, the book suggests that people who survive cancer are not so much survivors as the undead, like the spirits of Dostoevsky's story. She writes of her body dying "inch by inch" during the administering of the chemotherapy drug Adriamycin, which "is known, if spilled, to melt the linoleum on a clinic floor" (142, 57). She also notes that the brain damage caused by this treatment may last "ten years or more" (60).

> But Boyer's survival opens up the possibility of doing art and politics in a new way: Now that I am undying, the world is full of possibility. I could write a book in which nothing is left out, or write a work of undying literature in which everything that is missing shows up as the shadow of its own shape, or one where nothing could be displayed except as its consequence.
>
> Nothing would be missing from this book where nothing is not permitted: not the material world nor all of its semi-material relations. We do not often know the source of the things of the world and so are mostly left to imagine a lineage. We are abandoned by cause, left to guess as the effect, and in our guesses, we are abandoned by truth, left only to error, permitted metaphysics but never really wanting them in the first place. (201)

In Boyer's vision, the world of late capitalism is not fully mapped but instead murky; perhaps the metaphysics we are "permitted" is not the right tool for this moment, which resonates with Žižek's description of the secular atheist who is purportedly free but actually limited by resistance to the new. The radical and unrealized potential Žižek sees in Christianity is the "Openness . . . of living in the aftermath of the Event," which is limited by "propaganda" which

"fights against something of which it is not itself aware . . . the possibility (the utopian revolutionary-emancipatory potential) which is immanent to the situation" (40). In *The Undying* and her earlier work, Boyer figures this immanence as both concrete and connective, or, as she writes in the section quoted above, both "the material world" and "all of its semi-material relations." Boyer and Žižek stage undying—being alive after near-death or maintaining "Openness" after the event of God's human death—as constructive, and in Boyer's work, what is *not* left out of the resulting book is, crucially, reproductive labor: care work, mothering, and other forms of "keeping the world okay once it is here" (108).

Mayer, too, envisions a book that includes what has been denied, fleshing out Žižek's call to inhabit what might be permitted in a truly secular society. Her writing muses on the possibilities of maximalist poetry and links this formal concern to work and reproduction. Mayer wonders, "Why doesn't anybody pay me for my work?" and writes,

> You see I can't tell whether one thing or another is fitting in or not belonging because I think I have a fantasy it would be great to write without concentrating at all, just let the impishness of the sounds of the forms of the letters propel themselves … words aren't swept or compared like a mirror next to a picture of a woman, and he was dispiriting when we told him and as for her, she, I was tempted to say doesn't have to fucking have the baby, it's I who will. (54-55)

Desires refers to an unintended, third pregnancy, to which friends and in-laws respond with disapproval. These lines relate the poststructuralist insight that words make meaning through relation to Mayer's resistance to being censured for becoming pregnant when she cannot afford to have another child. Recalling Mayer's earlier vision of a book that "prove[s] the day like the dream has everything in it" and Boyer's "book where nothing is not permitted," these lines point

to new possibilities opened by putting unlikely subjects in relation to each other and, at the same time, contest a mindset characterized by austerity.[19]

The poem cited earlier in which Mayer says, "the thing I resent most is when someone says you won't have time to write if you have a family" (*Desires* 64) also critiques a notion of history or chronology that forecloses openness, which resonates with Žižek's observation that after the limit marked by God is abolished, societies tend to establish "a *new* pseudo-limit, a fake transcendence on behalf of which I act" (68). Mayer ruminates on the separateness of children from their parents: "they are separate and cannot consent to your ideas, it's not competitive but wavelike in the sense that history, though it gets beauty from the instinct for chronology, is literally a way of wasting time" (65). The poem then returns to the scene of telling her in-laws about her pregnancy, at which "the father-in-law had abruptly hung up the phone," and then transitions into a fantasy or dream in which the father-in-law "shook his hand, he didn't hide his hand, there was astonished love for once . . . he was freed, he needed no serving, he did it all himself without thinking, he held an infant, he was not lost, we didn't have to talk about money, we had vanquished death and its consequent security . . . " (66). Considered together, these moments in the poem suggest that though narrative has its uses—beauty, pleasure, the satisfaction of order—it also excludes. That is, the narrative of history obscures the contingency of past, present, and future events, and the zero-sum narrative of those who tell Mayer that having a child will make her poorer and less prolific (linked, here, to the narrative of mortality) excludes the generative possibilities of care. Mayer also writes in this poem, "My appetites are longer than the meaningless death that I would crush, ignore" (65). Mayer's counterintuitive

[19] While "austerity" usually refers to state policies, these logics shape "personal" attitudes as well, causing someone to disapprove, for example, of a poor poet having a third child. I wish to point to the way political logics of austerity play out in experiences of motherhood and how these experiences resist these logics.

suggestion, above, that the limit of death provides security resonates with Žižek's claim that limitlessness or openness tend to be feared most of all. In other words, reading Žižek together with Boyer and Mayer demonstrates what is lost when austerity governs socio-political thinking, and Boyer and Mayer suggest that reproductive work may help us think in different (unpredictable, abundant) terms about work and pleasure.

Mayer, like Žižek, juxtaposes a theistic understanding of "openness" or contingency with one that preserves liturgy without God. Each of the poems in *Desires* is addressed to an unnamed "you," and in "A Bean of Mine," Mayer wonders if her addressee will

> take me to New Orleans but don't introduce me to Wallace Stevens down there and tell me traditional beauty is just this world and then forgive me my trespasses, not for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory and so on for I wasn't brought up a Protestant, I can't remember the right end, it's in the liturgy, this is the people's work, I'm trying to do something specific here. (27-28)

While Mayer shares with Stevens a concern for the vitality of the material world, the poem resists Stevens's influential theory of the poet as a figure outside politics, an unequivocally masculine "master" (Stevens 66). In the background of this passage, furthermore, are two different understandings of work: as morally-charged and self-defining, as in the Protestant work ethic, and on the other hand, the sense of work suggested by "liturgy." As the poem suggests, the etymology of "liturgy" traces back to the Greek "leitourgia," where "leit" refers to people and "ourgia" is work. Kathi Weeks has shown how the internal contradictions in the work ethic, as traced by Max Weber, are sustained by a collaboration with other dominant cultural ideologies. As Weeks argues, these ideologies are similar across five hundred years of capitalism, but not quite the same, and the work ethic adapts to harness their power. During pre-industrial

capitalism, the work ethic was promulgated through an intimate connection to Protestant teachings about self-discipline and self-knowledge as religious virtues; by the nineteenth century, particularly in the United States, the emphasis was more on social mobility; and in postindustrial capitalism, the work ethic collaborates with an interest in "self-expression" and "creativity" (*Problem* 45-46).

In every period, the work ethic required by capitalism must emerge as a moral virtue, that is, as non-instrumental, in order for people to accept work, because the work ethic itself is not coherent. For example, it urges production at the same time as consumption and promotes individual independence while requiring people to submit to a structure of life that most would not choose (Weeks, *Problem* 42). As a result of the highly effective discipline of the work ethic, work has become naturalized, that is depoliticized; while disagreeing on questions of power and privilege in the places where work happens, people across the political spectrum tend to agree that work is good. Weeks challenges this tendency in feminism, which "has tended to focus more on the critique of work's organization and distribution than on questioning its values" (25).

In the lines above, then, there is an opposition, on the one hand, between Protestantism and Catholicism, which have different ways of ending the recitation of the Lord's Prayer (and different histories of incorporation into the working or ruling classes in America), and on the other hand, between the official, Catholic liturgy, which Mayer cannot recall, and another kind of liturgy that might emerge from the work of the people, including Mayer's creative work. In addition to refusing accepted notions of the role of work, Mayer's poems demand a reconsideration of how human culture is remembered and reproduced, through, for example, the disciplines of history and psychology. In *Midwinter's Day*, Mayer writes

> The history of every historical thing including God but not including all men and women individually, is a violent mess like this ice. But for the spaces even hunchbacked history has allowed in between the famous and loud for something that's defined as what does please us. Which is perhaps this story of an intimate family, though you won't believe or will be unable to love it, driven to research love's limits in its present solitude as if each man or woman in the world was only one person with everything I've mentioned separate in him or she didn't represent any history at all . . . (78)

I am interested in how this passage moves in two directions, first distinguishing the individual person from "history" in order to locate spaces for pleasure, emanating from people, against the chaos and pessimism of history. At the same time, the passage insists that the "individual," separated from other people and from history, is a myth. Soon after this, Mayer says, "I am like a woman who says I am another woman, or a man who says I am another man." Mayer is concerned, in other words, with the possibilities in the spaces between people and the gaps within history. Later in *Midwinter Day*, Mayer again associates an official representation of events with "ice," which opens to an expansive reimagining of living:

> I know
>
> The world is straight ice
>
> I know backwards the grief of life like chance
>
> . . .
>
> like the progression
>
> From memory to what they call freedom
>
> Or reason
>
> though it's not reason at all

It's an ideal like anarchism though it's not an ideal

It's a kind of time that has flown away from causes

Or gotten loose from them, pried loose

Or used them up, gotten away

no one knows why (93)

The turn from memory to freedom signals the poem's commitment to the generation of new forms rather than a preoccupation with the past, which Weeks, drawing upon Wendy Brown and Nietzsche, identifies as "Left melancholy" or "*ressentiment*" (185). This passage also suggests that thinking in terms of cause and effect obscures the freedom in a situation. Hannah Arendt makes a similar argument when she defines freedom as necessarily public, taking shape between people, rather than as a characteristic of the individual. Arendt shows how a misapprehension of freedom as residing in "an inward domain, the will" (145) leads to a misapprehension of history as "automatic" rather than contingent (168). Arendt finds a corrective to this tendency in the New Testament, in which she reads "miracles" as referring not only to supernatural events but also to "interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected" (168).

These poems are working, then, towards a different understanding of freedom that might emerge from attention to abundance in care work, the kind of work that has been most relentlessly targeted by liberal and neoliberal economies. Mayer's poems insist, furthermore, that this knowledge comes from sustained attention to a shifting set of relationships between people and objects, not from a fixed notion of identity. Mayer's poems resist the calcification of identity by questioning the notion of "confessional poetry" itself. In *Desires*, Mayer writes, "I only know how to make the letters coincide so as to make words in this nothing," and "in fact I'm a woman

about to be having her third child, her fourth in fact, and her fifth pregnancy" (203). At the same time, she insists that she is not "one of those poets who only talks about fears, or one of those who have given poetry, old modern poetry as they say, a reputation for being something psychological or even confessional, it is all so false" (203). Though these poems are composed of details from her life, Mayer reminds us that their purpose is not to narrate her life, but rather to inaugurate a new form of attention.

Immediately following this claim is a description of the speaker giving birth as a man through her/his penis which begins, "I am not a poet I am a man, giving birth to a baby." The poem ends with a description of how the speaker sees the world, in a way that makes meaning but also resists resolution. She writes that in contrast with people "at the store" who seem to embody "solid perspicacity," she sees "great balls of fire in the air" and "things gotten from the struggles of the innocent eye against the sky . . . things without meaning, new words and nothing, the nothing I might have begun with or you did, a you who is not you, a you who is nothing, an identity not to be found" (206). Perspicacity, in ordering the world to some degree, provides comfort that the speaker—seeing instead something apocalyptic—cannot access. In withholding (or delaying) interpretation, though, the speaker works with a generative void: "new words and nothing." What might be gained from the notion of "a you who is not you, a you who is nothing," and how is this connected to the poem's opposition to the "false" confessional ethos of canonical, mostly male, postwar American poetry? Furthermore, by seeming to inhabit but then suddenly departing from the confessional mode, how does Mayer's poetry play with expectations about (or dismissals of) a woman talking about her feelings?

For one, the way we think about our identities is overwritten by stories that Mayer's work suggests are stale, such as Freudian psychoanalysis. The description in this poem of a baby

coming out of a man's penis recalls Freud's claim that a woman's penis envy transmutes into her desire for a baby. Mayer also plays with this idea in *Midwinter Day* when she writes, "Small babies or infants are supposed in the mythology to be women's penises, I meant to say psychology . . . " (23). Significantly, both allusions to penis envy occur near other references to male artists and thinkers. In *Desires*, Mayer mentions Freud and Kerouac, and, continuing to articulate what her writing does, says, "I'm not remembering so wholeheartedly as Proust, structuring thought like Dante, I couldn't even do it if I tried, well maybe I should try, I'm not creating a new language like Joyce, not to mention all the other guys" (205). In *Midwinter Day*, after the suggestion that Freudian psychology has some of the same structures and attachments as mythology, Mayer also invokes but then dismisses other men who have shaped cultural understandings of the imagination: "Freud Pound & Joyce / Are fine-feathered youth's fair-weather friends / I take that back, better not to mention them / Or it's the end" (19). Mayer rehearses the notion of woman as lack by listing all the things her writing is not but also shows how that negative space, when conceived in terms of poetic style, may harbor possibility.

Mayer assembles things, feelings, the stuff of the world while resisting articulating a structural claim about this assembly, about "whether one thing or another is fitting in or not belonging," in order for a new understanding of the world to emerge (*Desires* 54). Her work engages in the project that Marcuse describes as "a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature" (*Aesthetic* 8). Marcuse claims that in this "aesthetic transformation," "the work is thus 'taken out' of the constant process of reality and assumes a significance and truth of its own" (*Aesthetic* 8). There is a paradox in this understanding of aesthetics: art summons a reality that is outside of "the constant process of reality," in what could

be characterized as a disclosing ("reveal") or a generating. Marcuse's point, following from ideology critique, is that what we take to be reality is a diminished, partial understanding of the real. Where he breaks from orthodox Marxism is in his insistence that art, at its best, distances itself from "the constant process of reality" in order to contest it. His theory comes into focus alongside Mayer's poems, which work with ordinary details and yet produce an extraordinary vision of reality. One of the poems in *Desires* alternates between discussions of a malfunctioning mimeograph machine, the economics of the family, and the formal capacities of poems:

> I'm so tired of poetry because I don't want to talk about it, also we're having so much trouble with the fucking mimeograph machine to get the ink to wash over every word of my poem, it has too many words for it. . . . Sometimes all we say all day long is hurry, even Sophia can say hotdog. About food and money the family is one body . . . What I mean is I eat the rest of your lunch and the water from your vegetables goes into our soup. . . . Now a rustling of papers is on top of my ear. There's no doubt about it poetry is different than prose I guess, I just showed Lewis how to tighten the screw we hope will make a greater tension on the machine's screen . . . often my own writing seems to me to be having too many cheap ingredients like poor people's food . . . (36)

Nelson notes of this section that

> Mayer suggests that the overwhelming demands of taking care of two children while being pregnant with a third, moving cities and taking on a new teaching job . . . making sure daily needs are met while subsisting at a near poverty level, and keeping up with one's own writing, have all contributed to pushing her out of poetry and into the more bloated, dirty, even boring realm of prose . . . (121)

While this passage, and *Desires* in general, are certainly concerned with practical questions of subsistence and care, I do not read *Desires* as prose, as Nelson seems to do, but rather as (prose) poetry. Mayer doesn't "want to talk about" poetry *as* she stretches poetic form. The poem is (partially) about the difficulty of printing poems and the vexed question of what, exactly, can go in them. When do quotidian details become cheap filler? If her poems have "too many words" for the mimeograph machine, can they still be called poems? Can poetry be maximalist and also exacting? When Mayer says that "poetry is different than prose," including phrases to either side of this claim that reinforce and qualify it, she neither acknowledges being "push[ed] out of poetry" nor suggests (with "I guess") that the line between these forms is indistinguishable, but rather maintains that poems have a particular capacity to see the contradictions and abundance of everyday life differently. Unlike (much) prose, Mayer's poems interrupt possible relations between objects and ideas in order to make new relations possible. In this way, her poems are like her family, in which everything gets used, if in unexpected ways.

Boyer's work pays similar attention to the world, gathering objects and images while resisting traditional accounts of organization: making room for an aesthetics of care to emerge. And like Mayer, the form she often chooses is the prose poem. Boyer's work, like Mayer's, employs both negation and maximalist accumulation in order to make visible the world-making properties of reproductive work.

Refusal, Writing, and the Matter of Care

Boyer considers the relationship between writing and care work in a pair of prose poems, "Not Writing" and "What is 'Not Writing'?" While the poems may be read as affirming the claim that Mayer "resent[s] most," that "you won't have time to write if you have a family"

(*Desires* 64), I argue that they work toward a form of writing that emerges from, rather than denies, care. The first poem constructs a ghostly list of all the books Boyer doesn't have time (or isn't well enough) to write, some of which are actual books by other (more prominent) writers, for which she claims authorship, like Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, David Graeber's *Debt*, and Marx's *The German Ideology* ("I am not writing 'Leaving the Atocha Station' by Anne Boyer . . . " [*Garments* 41]). She writes, "I am not writing a memoir because memoirs are for property owners . . . I am also not writing any kind of poetry, not prose poems contemporary or otherwise, not poems made of fragments, not tightened and compressed poems, not loosened and conversational poems" (*Garments* 41). As I will discuss later, Boyer critiques memoirs more directly in *The Undying*, specifically cancer memoirs whose focus on the individual struggle against cancer mystifies the environmental and structural causes of the disease. In the same vein as Mayer's claim that she is "tired of poetry," this poem is (at least partially) about the difficulty of writing poetry. When read along with "What is 'Not Writing'?," the poem proposes a new kind of poetry that emerges from attention to reproductive work—the very tasks that keep Boyer from writing. The poems demonstrate Boyer's interest in how a reevaluation of care work could reshape artistic work.

Boyer writes,

> Not writing is working, and when not working at paid work working at unpaid work like caring for others, and when not at unpaid work like caring, caring also for a human body, and when not caring for a human body many hours, weeks, years, and other measures of time spent caring for the mind in a way like reading or learning and when not reading and learning also making things . . . There is illness and injury which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is cynicism, disappointment, political outrage, heartbreak,

> resentment, and realistic thinking which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is reproduction which has been like illness and injury and taken up many hours with not writing . . . (*Garments* 44)

In this insistently flat, even boring account of what life consists of, Boyer suggests that there is value not in distilling the most transcendent or exceptional elements of life into a poem, but rather in foregrounding drudgery. Boyer intentionally sidesteps a more traditionally "beautiful" poem in order to call another kind of writing into being. After all, these poems are a paradox: they are pieces of writing about "not writing."

The end of the poem, especially when read alongside *The Undying*, suggests that theorizing care work differently will necessarily remake writing:

> It is easy to imagine not writing, both accidentally and intentionally. It is easy because there have been years and months and days I have thought the way to live was not writing have known what writing consisted of and have thought "I do not want to do that" and "writing steals from my loved ones" . . . or "writing steals from my already empty bank account" or "writing gives me ideas I do not need or want" or "writing is the manufacture of impossible desire" or writing is like literature is like the world of monsters is the production of culture is I hate culture is the world of wealthy women and of men. (46)

These lines suggest that what the speaker wants is not so much to be able to write (by having more time, say, or money), and therefore to enter into "the world of wealthy women and of men," but rather to generate a new cultural discourse on the work of not-writing. Boyer's writing proposes, in part, that reproductive work may not be intrinsically frustrating or alienating, but rather that a lack of attention to its properties—a lack of discourse on care work—has made it so. Echoing Herbert Marcuse's analysis of affirmative culture, Boyer's speaker is wary of

participating in the work of cultural production, or of bolstering with her writing the system that structures her writing as time away from her loved ones and time away from paid work. Marcuse's analysis is also useful in understanding the materialism of Boyer's work. Marcuse tracks through Western philosophy an elaboration of the soul as the "noncorporeal being of man" which "is asserted as the real substance of the individual" and analyzes how this idealism, when mixed with Enlightenment liberalism, in which "[e]ach individual is immediate to himself," absorbs popular discontent, preventing radical change ("Affirmative" 104, 102). Similar to Marcuse, Boyer's insistent materialism zeroes in on how forms of writing collaborate with capitalism, writing in *The Undying*, "I would rather write nothing at all than propagandize for the world as it is" (116). What Boyer adds to a traditional Marxist materialism is something between the soul and the world of matter, which she sometimes calls "feelings" or "relations." Boyer's writing proposes a new theorization of mind and body that would restructure the world: by feeling differently, we will live differently, which will allow us to feel differently still. In Boyer's work, the poet-mother's sick body, challenging accepted notions of work and care, is at the center of this restructuring.

In its attention to the work of care and maintenance, Boyer's writing, like Mayer's, enacts a materialism that emphasizes relation, as when Boyer imagines a "book where nothing is not permitted: not the material world nor all of its semi-material relations" (201). The possessive pronoun before "semi-material relations" locates these relations in the material world, suggesting that these relations arise from the material world. But they are not purely material; we may read them as related to cognition or feeling. The juxtaposition of these two terms suggests that there is something unexplored in the relationship of matter (like a body) to non- or semi-matter (like a feeling of pain or pleasure, or a memory), and furthermore, that attention to this relationship is

essential to an anti-capitalist position. Boyer uses Marx's well-worn maxim, "All that is solid melts into air," to reflect on the work of opposition required in late capitalism, in which

> all that is air becomes, under a later version of the same conditions, too polluted to breathe. . . . Respiration is a refeeding of what is abstract into what is so tangible it changes our form, at least slightly. Then it dissipates, again, we never know as what. As one of the undying I will now try to conjure up not the undying soul but instead an undying substance, reground the atmospheric as new evidence. (201-202)

In Marx's phrase, the comparatively solid feudalism is disassembled, made airy or flexible by capitalism and democracy. Boyer insists that pollution, made invisible yet having devastating material effects, must be made solid again by the undying, the so-called "survivor" who has been made dead while living. The work of resistance in late capitalism, in other words, is to insist on the materiality of concepts like pollution, exploitation, racism, or misogyny.

That what is inarguably material (like pollution) is so difficult, at times, to recognize as such points to the importance of paying attention to relation and transformation: the passage of polluted air into illness or a tumor, but also, generatively, the life-giving connections between body and world foregrounded in care work, including motherhood. For example, in the poem cited earlier that refigures history as "wasting time" rather than "chronology," Mayer writes, "It's obvious that our own ideas of perfection are a reflection of something that exists. My appetites are longer than the meaningless death I would crush, ignore" (*Desires* 65). While the first sentence suggests a kind of idealism, the second implies that desire may lead to a life beyond the fatalistic limits of mortality (or, as the poem alludes to earlier, the restrictions of chronology or history). In other words, Mayer sets forth a kind of material-idealism, repurposing the ideal realm as something useful for utopian politics. This is also the poem that ends with the

speaker's disapproving father-in-law transformed, "freed" from scarcity into abundance, and so the speaker's "appetites," her imaginative and abundant relationship to the world of matter, point toward "something that exists," or that could exist. What *could* exist, the poem suggests, already exists, in a sense, in reproductive work.

Along these lines, Boyer's work suggests that anti-capitalist world-making requires a new way of thinking about "making." In *The Undying*, Boyer writes,

> There is the work of making the world, which is the world that's good to look at, and there is the quieter work of keeping the world okay once it is here. Making the world is a concrete pleasure, but the nature of the rest of it has yet to be determined. It's hard to make a judgment of the senses regarding the invisible and necessary efforts we exchange between us. It is hard to read, for beauty, the everywhere space we are always making around the always manifesting world of the world. (108-109)

Boyer figures the problem of appreciating reproductive work as an aesthetic one; the "invisible and necessary efforts" that happen between people are not easily grasped by the senses. This passage, and Boyer's work in general, suggests that the "everywhere space" around the world—the work of keeping the world okay—may be "read, for beauty." The claim that the nature of care work "has yet to be determined" recalls Adrienne Rich's discussion of "the myth of the masculine artist and thinker" and women's artistic work. On the one hand, she argues, there is something mystifying and false about the artist's need to work in isolation, but on the other hand, women stuck in "traditional" organizations of gendered work may, in fact, be prevented from doing imaginative work. Rich looks forward, however, to a new, possibly utopian relation between creative and reproductive work: "There must be ways, and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united"

(Rich 23-24). Rich argues that while women overburdened with care work are undoubtedly less free to write, this does not mean that care work must *always* compete with artistic work. There may be some as-yet-unknown configuration of art and care that renders the two no longer in competition, as Mayer seems to suggest in her resistance to people's criticisms of her pregnancy. Along with Mayer, Boyer and Rich imply that thinking differently about the space between the things of the "created" world will necessarily change the way we see created things; that is, rethinking reproductive work will change our aesthetic vision.

A possible answer to the question of how to read the "everywhere space" of relation and care aesthetically is found in Boyer's earlier essay, "Formulary for a New Feeling." A reworking of an early Situationist text, Ivan Chtcheglov's "Formulary for a New Urbanism," the essay imagines how somatic and social life may be reconstituted by architecture that makes space, literally, for "feeling with each other" (*Handbook* 109). While Chtcheglov's essay proposes a new architecture that would allow for changed conceptions of time and space and a new sociality, Boyer's essay imagines a new human experience of and relationship to feeling. Both essays are insistently forward-looking: Chtcheglov criticizes a tendency toward nostalgia in the aesthetic imagination, regretting that "the promised land of new syntheses continually recedes into the distance. Everyone wavers between the emotionally still-alive past and the already-dead future" (2). Boyer reworks this section as, "in the promised land of theoretical disquietude, new feeling incessantly recedes into critique. Everyone wavers between Adorno and the damp sorrow unfolding under her own nose" (*Handbook* 106). In the Situationist text, the opportunity for synthesis of historical, technological development with architectural forms is lost; the implication is that this society fails to imagine the future through its built spaces. The failed synthesis in Boyer is not architectural but intellectual-emotional, between personal feeling and

critical theory. Boyer suggests that Left theory misses an opportunity by not taking seriously the affective field, which, in this essay, is integrated with the somatic. Critical theory, including feminism, demonstrates how the concepts assumed to be private (subjectivity, gender, sexuality) are publicly, socially formed; here, Boyer thinks through how our experience of affect and sensation would change if our feelings were literally made public.

Boyer's essay seeks to address the isolation caused by emotional-physical pain, which I read across Boyer's work as fundamentally inseparable. In her proposed "investigational community," people gather in buildings intended for feeling a particular feeling: for example, "buildings . . . alluring to those whose left legs quiver with dread or those who think with contemplative lips" (*Handbook* 109-10). Boyer's text emphasizes the expansiveness of this idea, how it reorganizes and makes space in previously confining situations: "The intentional and recurrent transfer of emotion from one body to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next to the next will result in unmitigated restructuring of somatic and social life" (*Handbook* 110). Boyer contrasts this vision with the current reality of people in "apartments and single-family dwellings" who "unequally distribute feelings among two or four human bodies." Her architecture for public feeling thus unseats the nuclear family as the center of emotional care. In response to the objection that "this new order of common emotion" is too taxing or intense, Boyer points out that "in every amalgamation of humans certain types (poets, girls) are currently charged with representing various tendencies of feeling as specialists in sentiment" (110-111). Boyer's call thus resonates, in its architectural challenge to the nuclear family, with materialist feminist plans to deprivatize the home, and, in its demand to restructure emotional life, with

queer and feminist critiques of the family.[20] Communal feeling challenges the boundaries of the single-family home, the family, and the individual. It also imagines the body as liberating rather than isolating. Being the sole inhabitant of a body, especially during illness, can be lonely—but it does not have to be.

By grounding her project in a transformation of feeling, Boyer references 19th-century feminist sentimentalism, which also sought to change public life through embodied emotion. At the same time, as is especially clear in *The Undying*, Boyer rejects a more contemporary understanding of "sentimentality": well-worn or cliched emotions; feelings that have been created by someone else, possibly at cross-purposes with one's own. If Boyer's writing is committed to a critique of generic form while locating the possibility of social change in feeling, what kind of "sentimentalism" is this? How does Boyer's work intervene, furthermore, in a cultural history in which the mother delineates the limit of political life? Eva Cherniavksy argues that since "the maternal marks the site (the 'fold') in modern democratic order where the political is transformed into the affective . . . the difficulty from the vantage of a late-twentieth-century, radical democratic feminism is to rethink the maternal as both a political *and* an affective structure" (xiii). Against a persistent sentimentalist view of the mother as the person who feels for everyone in the private home, Boyer proposes that the mother's writing constructs a new mode of public feeling.

The essay thus demands that both care and pain be made social, thus resonating with *The Undying*, which traces the devastating effects of the privatization of care. Two related discussions of visibility in *The Undying* help clarify that Boyer's "new feeling," though public, is not necessarily visible; the emphasis is still on somatic feelings rather than on the representation

[20] For an account of materialist feminist challenges to the single-family home, see Hayden, *Grand Domestic*. I discuss feminist and queer critiques of the family in chapter 2.

of them (in language or images, for example). Boyer's inhabitants "will spend their time in the grand evocative biology of singular and composite feelings that will partially leave the realm of bodily experience for that of representation but will not roam too far" (*Handbook* 110). Like the assertion that "[f]eeling is the most graceful means of engendering feeling," "[e]vocative biology" suggests a circularity of effect: the biology of (physical-emotional) feeling evokes more feeling, or, the body, together with other bodies, evokes a feeling that feeds back into and constitutes it (*Handbook* 108).

Boyer's desire for feeling to *remain* somatic, even as it is represented, resonates with her discussion in *The Undying* of the politics of visibility. Writing against a narrative of medical progress that emphasizes awareness and visibility and applauds "survivors," Boyer points out the ways in which cancer treatment, following the demands of profit rather than care, has not improved or even worsened. For example, Boyer points out that Audre Lorde spent five days in the hospital after her mastectomy in the 1970s, while Boyer is forced to leave the hospital the same day as her double mastectomy. Boyer returns to work the same week, continuing to hide her illness from her students and employers for fear of being fired (*Undying* 155-57). Along these lines, Boyer insists that an increasing number of people are precarious in the conditions of late capitalism and that "[v]isibility doesn't reliably change the relations of power to who or what is visible except insofar as visible prey are easier to hunt" (*Undying* 159). Boyer finds "hope," however, in the fact that "[s]ome things . . . remain mysterious and unspectacular" (160), suggesting potential in the not-yet-explained ordinary.

Information and Embodiment

In addition to its interest in generating a new sociality from the body, "Formulary for a New Feeling" occupies a crucial place in Boyer's redefinition of "information." Across her work, Boyer criticizes the alienating uses to which information is put and develops an alternative concept of information rooted in artistic and reproductive work. She writes,

> We move within repulsing and adhesive bodies whose sensations constantly draw us toward other bodies, also repulsing and adhesive. Certain entertainments, certain sensate hourly activities, allow us to brush against this information, but most of it remains partial. The codes must be sought in the serious locales of fingertips and thigh muscles, also in the hamstrings, the molars, the minor joints, the mammoth comprehending digestion, the ardent and responsive scalp. (*Handbook* 105-106)

Boyer presents sensory-emotional "information" as the force that governs the movement of bodies and thus structures social life and relationships. The essay insists that new possibilities for social life come from the body itself, in its particularity, and not the mind. Boyer refers in the next paragraph to a "database" in "every wrist," which, along with "codes" and "information," above, suggests a reworking of the language of 21st-century data.

In *Garments Against Women*, Boyer writes against a certain deployment of "information" that destroys community:

> Did I explain that those were the days when people wrote on machines that connected to machines that connected to machines that connected to people who wrote on machines?
>
> Those were the days when we believed in information.
>
> And I was a person in those days, but I did not believe in information. I liked to imagine the interfaces that would make the public private and make the private okay.

> Privacy was not an effect, exactly, of confession, which in those days was buying stock in the public company.
>
> . . .
>
> There is no such thing, really, as the public ever again. We fractured into temperate and intemperate zones and small service colonies and into villages surrounded by walls of inoperative cars. Now we can barely remember what once formed us, and the last and first thing any of us thinks about is poetry. (82)

As in her critique in the *The Undying* of "visibility," and, more specifically, of cancer memoirs, Boyer expresses skepticism about the efficacy of "confession." Telling one's story is not necessarily liberating, particularly when such telling is encouraged (and absorbed) by hegemony. Boyer points out, for example, that "the challenge" in discussing cancer "is not to speak into the silence, but to learn to form a resistance to the often obliterating noise," in which the emphasis on individual triumph mystifies the political dimension of cancer:

> To tell the story of one's own breast cancer is supposed to be to tell a story of "surviving" via neoliberal self-management—the narrative is of the atomized individual done right, self-examined and mammogrammed, of disease cured with compliance, 5k runs, organic green smoothies, and positive thought. (*Undying* 9-10)

Boyer wrestles throughout *The Undying* with the question of how to tell a personal story while insisting on this story's connection to social life, and with the related question of how to represent the body as part of a (toxic) world, rather than a private entity (whose functions and illnesses are predetermined by genetics, for example). What might "make the private okay" in the poem cited above, is *not* such a confession, which aligns with late capitalism's privatization of the public ("buying stock in the public company").

I read the line, "There is no such thing, really, as the public ever again" not as a claim about the impossibility of any future public, but as marking a point of crisis in public life. In the midst of a dangerous privileging of information or abstraction at the expense of human life, Boyer seeks a different means of bringing the public and the private into relationship: an alternative to information (or perhaps an alternative kind of information) that would yield a different organization of society. Though this new information is indistinct by the standards of 21st-century data, it is still material—in fact, often more material than the data that claims to describe life.

Boyer writes about the kind of information that is routinely elided in the construction of neoliberal subjects:

> Inadmissible information is often information that has something to do with biology (illness, sex, reproduction) or money (poverty) or violence (how money and bodies meet). Inadmissible information might also have to do with being defanged by power (courts, bosses, fathers, editors, and other authorities) or behaving against power in such a way that one soon will be defanged (crime). . . . To feel deeply, or to admit to feeling deeply, is also inadmissible, though not as inadmissible as to admit to having been un-free. (*Garments* 9)

Boyer queries what counts as evidence, what realities may be considered in official descriptions of life. As in other places in her work, she disputes the notion that data, as it is assembled in contemporary America, produces transparency. Her use of juridical language, furthermore, suggests that liberalism's rights framework disavows the experiences she lists here, which define reality for people who are poor, who are mothers, or who are defined as criminals. The double-bind of such experiences is that admitting to being un-free is understood as a violation of

liberalism, which defines all citizens as free. Neoliberalism recodes the real, material un-freedom of people who are sick, who are caring for others, or who are poor, for example, as a moral failing, a failure of belief in the freedom that purportedly exists.

Boyer sets both kinds of information—"inadmissible information" and the "information" in the body in "Formulary"—in opposition to the information privileged by 21st-century data culture, abstractions which often miss the material relationships that constitute life. By using language like "database" and "code," Boyer asks what might happen if we were to take the sensory-emotional information in the body as seriously as we take the information assembled by computers. In this sense, Boyer seeks to correct what Katherine Hayles describes as the "platonic backhand," by which "a simplified abstraction" of some process or entity (such as a scientific figure or model) is portrayed, incorrectly, as "the originary form from which the world's multiplicity derives" (12). Against this platonic backhand, Boyer insists that embodied experience be understood as primary—which is not to say essential, since Boyer's work also insists that bodies are constructed by their surroundings and by other bodies. Against the tendency toward abstraction, which Hayles describes as "the construction of a hierarchy in which information is given the dominant position and materiality runs a distant second" (12), Boyer imagines a new network composed of bodies and feelings.

In "Formulary," as cited above, Boyer proposes the "intentional and recurrent transfer of emotion from one body to the next to the next to the next to the next . . . ," which echoes the chain of "machines that connected to machines that connected to machines that connected to people who wrote on machines" in *Garments*. Again, it is important to note that it is the "body," not the person or mind, that conducts emotion in this chain, and that the beginning of "Formulary" decentralizes the body even further; information comes from a wrist or scalp, not

from a mind governing or synthesizing the information from the body's various parts. One question this essay asks is: what would happen if we built a world around feeling, rather than taking the world as given and figuring out what to do in this world? Though Boyer's work acknowledges the un-freedom made invisible by certain collections of official information, it also points toward the freedom possible through the collective assembling of marginalized, embodied information. How would the experience of embodied pleasure or pain change if the body were understood to be uncontained, as Boyer suggests: to be social?

Reading "Formulary for a New Feeling" with *The Undying* helps situate Boyer's proposal for an architecture for shared feelings as an intervention into the construction of the body itself. Since feeling is embodied and *may be embodied differently*—"[t]he embodied location of feeling is variable"—feeling differently will change the body (*Handbook* 108). Throughout *The Undying,* Boyer criticizes the idea that pain is private and isolating, countering Elaine Scarry's influential argument, for example, that pain "destroys language" by pointing out that a creature in pain often displays clear signs of its pain (*Undying* 212). Boyer speculates, instead, that "pain is widely declared inarticulate for the reason that we are not supposed to share a language for how we really feel" (212). That the body is social also means that it is historical. Following the description of pain quoted above, Boyer claims, "It is history that fails pain, as it also fails language" (242). In other words, both language and pain must be historicized. The body understood not as a discrete entity but as a confluence of sensations cannot be separated from other bodies, which have their own histories.

Boyer's enigmatic conclusion to this section in *The Undying* recalls her vision of a book in which "nothing is not permitted" or "in which everything that is missing shows up as the shadow of its own shape": "Maybe suffering pain is not for nothing, or is for nothing-plus: pain's

education is an education in *everything* and a reminder of *nothing's all*" (242). Reading this along with Boyer's critique of Western humanist efforts to delimit the body, we can understand "pain's education" as an experience of expansion, which is at the same time an experience of void. "Nothing-plus" denotes that perceiving the material world differently requires some process of negation, which then leads to everything/nothing. Boyer's claim, earlier, that there is hope in those things that "remain mysterious and unspectacular" is also linked to negativity: "The fate of the world relies on the promise of the negative, just as we can rely that sight is not the only sense" (*Undying* 160). Boyer's work calls for a literature of the negative, or the not-yet: a literature of embodied feelings, obscured causes and effects, a literature "in which everything that is missing shows up as the shadow of its own shape" (201).

"A literature that is not against us"

As discussed above, both Boyer and Chtcheglov take aim at modes of creation that reproduce restrictive forms of life; Chtcheglov is disheartened by a retrograde architectural imagination that produces an "already-dead future," and Boyer laments that "new feeling incessantly recedes into critique." I turn now to Boyer's critique of literature's role in reproducing un-freedom and her articulation of a form of literature that might lead, instead, to freedom.

Boyer is critical of "cancer memoirs" that help construct cancer as an individual battle rather than a social problem. Such literature does damage, in part, by fostering the illusion that visibility leads to progress. Boyer explores a related idea in the poem "The Open Book," which traces a notion of "transparency" that structures capitalism, the family, and literature and that, ironically, obscures the range of human possibilities. The poem demonstrates how bookkeeping,

or keeping "a transparent account," assumes that the person keeping the account would steal if not for accounting; in other words, accounting structures her subjectivity as capitalist: "She is accounting transparently because there is a larger body which claims to know her heart: it assumes her heart is naturally a heart desiring profit, a heart which reflects (in miniature) the fundamental desire of the larger body, too" (*Garments* 34). In other words, accounting constructs a subject who desires profit and suggests that this subject existed always, naturally, prior to capitalism. Boyer connects this "transparent account" to social life and cultural production: "The accounting is also the transparency required, by convention, among humans in human relationships like children to their parents, of a husband to his wife, or a friend to a friend. … It could also be a 'transparent account' that is literature" (35). The problem with "transparency" is that it purports to be descriptive—showing the way things are—when in fact it is normative, implying that people "naturally" want to take advantage of each other. Literature's transparency implies, perhaps, that the work of perceiving the world is done; all that remains is to represent it. Boyer registers the damage done by such literature in her claim from *The Undying*, quoted earlier, "I would rather write nothing at all than propagandize for the world as it is" (116).

"The Open Book" suggests that both literature and capitalist structures like accounting and waged work shape desire in a limited way: a person is constructed as honest or as a thief, but an honest person is only thus because of the transparent accounting. The desire to steal structures the transparency itself; "transparency" supports the myth that a person inherently thinks like a capitalist. As a solution, Boyer proposes refusal, out of which might come an expanded sense of human desire and thus possibility: "To refuse a bookkeeperly transparency is to protect the multiplicity of what we really want" (36). The generative, positive element of Boyer's negativity is understood best when situated in the autonomist tradition, which Kathi Weeks seeks to

synthesize with feminism's attention to reproductive work. Reviewing the refusal of work movement in autonomist Marxism, Weeks notes that "the word refusal may be unfortunate in the sense that it does not immediately convey the constructive element that is so central to autonomist thought," which seeks to articulate "a potential mode of life that challenges the mode of life now defined by and subordinated to work" (*Problem* 99-100). Autonomism, a "postindividualist" and "postscarcity vision," is oriented around "access and expansion: the enrichment of subjectivity, the expansion of needs, and the cultivation of an element or quality of desire that exceeds existing modes of satisfaction" (*Problem* 103). Refusing existing forms of description—like the purportedly neutral information in an *account* (whether a business ledger or a narrative of surviving cancer)–is the first step towards cultivating or recognizing desire that is not delimited by capitalism.

Perhaps this is why Boyer writes, in the poem "No World but the World," "There is no superiority in making things or in re-making things" (*Garments* 20). I read this fascinating and perplexing poem, which ends with a page-long list of miscellaneous items and people, as a meditation on labor, matter, and genre, best understood through Sara Ahmed's claim that "[t]he object is not reducible to itself, which means it does not 'have' an 'itself' that is apart from its contact with others" (243).[21] After the list, which includes such items as "hair extensions," "perfume that smells like party girls," "every apartment complex having its own ducks," "sunglasses resembling those of RAF leader Ulrike Meinhof," "plump women," "bleach-haired boys smoking dope against the chain-link fence," "the workers walking to their strip mall jobs,"

[21] Ahmed elaborates a Marxist, feminist phenomenology, which extends Husserl's concept of "background" to include not only what a subject does not see directly or focus on in a literal sense, but also the history of labor that is invisible. By following figurations of tables in phenomenology and feminist theory, Ahmed claims that in order to perceive how bodies, objects, and spaces constitute each other, we must consider the histories of those bodies, objects, and spaces: "If orientations are an effect of what we tend toward, then they point to the future, to what is not yet present. And yet, orientations are shaped by what is behind us, creating a loop between what is toward and behind" (247-248).

and “the strip malls,” the poem ends, “everything in the everything like ‘there is no world but the world!’” (*Garments* 20). One can read “there is no world but the world” as either a misapprehension or an affirmation of the material world, or a little of both. The statement may reference a non-critical perspective on the world: an acceptance of society as it is currently organized, for example, or a failure to take into account the history of objects (Ahmed’s “background”). On the other hand, “there is no world but the world” may be a call to commit wholeheartedly to a materialist analysis: that the way to be present for the world is to go into it. I read the line dialectically: as an insistence that matter is not immediately apprehended; that the senses are enmeshed with ideology and that it is therefore necessary to build a different apparatus for sensing people and objects.

The poem asks what narratives different genres make possible and obscure, and how a genre more attentive to care would repair some of the damage of late-capitalist life. In this poem, Boyer’s interest in negotiating between “the work of making the world” and “the work of keeping the world okay once it’s here” converges with her interest in problematizing data and literary genres. The poem’s first two sections outline a landscape from which care has retreated, and Boyer insists that a critical attention to genre may make possible more expansive notions of care. She emphasizes the stakes of thinking towards a kind of writing that could generate meaning beyond received storylines: “Epics are the dance music of the people who love war. Movies are the justice of the people who love war. Information is the poetry of the people who love war” (*Garments* 19). This juxtaposition of genres points to a dangerous convergence of pleasure and violence: the glorification of nationalist violence as a kind of dance music; the slickness of commercial film as a substitute for ethics. In the last statement, Boyer returns to her critique of the notion that data describes human life. Because information is structured by the

regimes that produce it (like liberal capitalism), the narrative it produces hews to the vision of that regime. That is, information "sees" the body according to the rules governing that system of information.

As Hayles argues, a radical vision of human life must be generated from the body, not in spite of it, and Boyer points to such a vision in the last section of the poem, which suggests (if elliptically) a maximalist poetics that attends to the relays between objects, people, and care. Hayles argues that forms of posthumanism that situate information as prior to materiality and that conceptualize the body as prosthesis maintain the disembodiment central to liberal humanism, which emphasizes the mind as the site of individual identity (3-4). Against a culture that claims (purportedly neutral, apolitical) information as the most meaningful description of human life, Boyer intervenes with an alternate form of description that demands that the story of the body be told differently.

The genre that might achieve this, as I understand it, is the genre Boyer develops throughout *Garments Against Women*: the prose poem. In "No World but the World," she articulates the power of this genre: "The syntactical evidence of poetry without the frame of poetry is a crime that is much more criminal. Or rather, if it is not in the frame of poetry, poetic syntax is evidence, mostly, of having no sense" (18). To encounter words whose relation is unfamiliar or speculative (that is, poetic syntax) in the form of a sentence is especially disturbing, perhaps because it suggests that the logic or sense that one expects to find in sentences may be invaded or displaced by this new non-sense. As with Mayer's skeptical references to "history" and "reason," Boyer's meditation on the prose poem stakes out a kind of sense that refuses what passes for sense in a political-economic logic that erases and denies care. I read *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* and *The Undying*—both works of prose, but often

stylistically very close to the prose poems of *Garments Against Women*—as pushing "the syntactical evidence of poetry" as far as it will go into prose. To describe a world that is coming into being, Boyer must use a form that is also coming into being.

Information, Care, and the Family

The last item in the list in "No World but the World" points to the harmful gap between applications of information and care. The poem concludes with "everyone hugging the duct tape replica like starving little rhesus monkeys," an allusion to the primate experiments conducted by Harry Harlow's lab at the University of Wisconsin. Conducted between 1955 and 1960, the experiments studied the effects of maternal care on the development of baby monkeys by constructing faux mothers of various temperatures and softness (Haraway, *Primate* 232). (The most forbidding mother replicas shook off the baby monkeys or contained retractable brass spikes [Haraway, *Primate* 238].) Scientists also studied the effects of "total social isolation" on baby monkeys placed from birth into a stainless steel chamber, denied the sight, sound, or touch of any other monkey or human. Donna Haraway comments that the purpose of this destruction of the monkeys' psyches was to learn how to rebuild them, and thus, presumably, how to treat depression in humans (*Primate* 242). The "mother surrogate" experiments also sought knowledge through deprivation, as suggested by a television program's commentary on the experiment: "until man knows himself, he can know nothing" (234). This self-knowledge is situated in ambivalent relation to mothers, as Haraway points out. On the one hand, the experiment reinforces (or hypothesizes) a punitive focus on maternal insufficiency as the source of pathology in humans. On the other hand, the experiment, conducted as more women worked outside the home, was intended to suggest that "contact comfort," rather than literal nourishment

(through breastfeeding, for example), is most essential to social and emotional development; therefore, fathers may be just as capable as mothers of caring for babies (235). That the experiments seek self-knowledge through the construction of "maternal" cruelty (in fact, the cruelty of Harlow seeking the "reality" of the possible cruelty of women), and that these experiments earned Harlow "the most prestigious award in the field of psychiatry" point to how science is structured by misogyny and produces meanings within a fixed field. As Haraway writes, "the monkeys gave back the language with which they were built, and it was a language of scientific love" (243).

Whether the monkey experiments uncoupled or fixed fast mother and baby, they unequivocally defended the nuclear family. In constructing a "nuclear family apparatus" that put four heterosexual monkey "couples" and their offspring in community, but prevented the pairs from mating with other couples, researchers sought to demonstrate the benefits of compulsory heterosexuality. It was thus that "the monogamous father became an iconic Harlow natural-technical object of knowledge in a period of great concern for 'the family' that characterized suburban America in the 1960s" (240). Constructing experiments which can apprehend only the comfort emanating from a mother (or surrogate mother) and which envision the nuclear family as the most valuable community—"the telos in the study of love"—contributes to the isolation of care in the nuclear family (241). Boyer writes against this tendency in "Formulary for a New Feeling" and in her account of the difficulty of being cared for by friends when the state makes (minimal) provisions for care only within the legal family. In *The Undying*, Boyer recounts that her doctor requires her to bring someone to the appointment at which she is given her diagnosis; Boyer's friend, who cannot take paid time off work, uses her lunch break to accompany Boyer to the appointment:

> In the United States, if you aren't someone's child or married to someone the law allows no one else guaranteed leave from work to take care of you. If you are loved outside the enclosure of family, the law doesn't care how deeply—even with all the unofficialized love in the world enfolding you, if you need to be cared for by others, it must be in stolen slivers of time. (29)

In alluding to the Harlow experiments, Boyer suggests that the scientific impulse to turn care into data has yielded, decades later, a society that denies care by limiting that care to the family.

As in Boyer's critiques of the cancer industry, "No World but the World" implies that the information produced by scientists purportedly engaged in improving human life may instead be used against people, and that repairing this damage requires attention to labor. The poem describes "*survival-life*," a "brute like a shadow and a bear not a human" that is present "in these rooms and apartments and duplexes and trailers and shared houses and single-family houses and estates" and which demands "the labor of your body, not the work of your hands" (*Garments* 19). As in her claim that "everyone" hugs the duct tape replica, the enumeration of different dwelling types suggests that Boyer wants to emphasize that labor is extracted across classes. The poem claims, furthermore, that anti-capitalist critique must focus on care work, which has been privatized to the nuclear family. Without a new articulation of care and an expansion of its spaces, data will continue to be used against people; neither people in families nor those outside of them are able to live beyond the "shadow" of "survival life."

Among the many limitations of the Harlow experiments, of course, is the assumption of an analogy between monkeys and humans that moves in both directions. That is, it is absurd to construct nuclear families for monkeys, and it is also wrong to assume that what happens to a monkey in a laboratory predicts or describes what happens to a person in a specific culture. This

assumption of an analogy between humans and monkeys denies the specificity of both human and monkey sociality as it unfolds in a particular place and time. The poem's final list of disparate objects, people, and places, culminating in "everything in the everything like 'there is no world but the world!'" is an expression of hope in human culture as self-generating and subject to unpredictable transformations. The poem holds out hope that this collection of artifacts, un-regulated and un-taxonomized, may reanimate visions of what people are capable of when neither structures of labor nor hierarchies of making and care are taken for granted.

Poetry Against Austerity

Mayer also questions traditional narratives of the family through references in *Desires* to the myth of Demeter. At the same time, Mayer juxtaposes the material constraints of being a poor poet with an expansive, abundant idealism to pose a challenge to austerity. "Cista Mistica" considers the relationship between poetic practice, material reproduction, and the family. The poem fleshes out a shifting, unstable sense of "perfection" that both affirms material imperfection and leans utopically toward something like the ideal realm. On the one hand, Mayer mentions edited papers arriving "full of errors" and complains of being "these poor _____ living our _____ life today for the sake of this art of a perfection we never see," pointing to both the failure of poetry to capture what it aims for and the poverty that comes with poetry. Mayer also writes that her "daily thoughts" are

> passing and severe … but anyway I'm supposed to crack them up into the looser mystical spheres or onto that other orb of perfection where though nothing new is happening there the difference is made and then I'm supposed to do that without even being reimbursed

> for my initial outlays for expenses for going with fear down the road … and now we are both wondering what sex I am. (*Desires* 33)

This passage ambivalently preserves "perfection" as a generative artistic node: an idea or desire that sets the present into relief. José Esteban Muñoz traces in queer aesthetics an animation of the past and future that insists that "the present is not enough," and along these lines, he draws upon certain resonances of German idealism in Frankfurt School thinkers (27). For example, Muñoz employs Marcuse's concept of the Nirvana principle, which resists the performance principle (which "limit[s] the forms and quantity of pleasure that the human is allowed"), to read "the great interruption" staged by Andy Warhol and the painter Jim Hodges (134-36). In Mayer's poem, the venturing is more spatial than temporal: the "orb of perfection" is somewhere else. Mayer's poetry insists that radical change may come, first, not from new events or actions, but rather from a new relation to language. "There the difference is made" recalls the first poem of Gertrude Stein's collection, *Tender Buttons*, which paved the way for experimental poets, like Mayer: "All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading" (11). As in Stein's work, the "difference" that Mayer envisions rests on a new relation to language, which, in her case, is closely tied to linking motherhood to abundance rather than austerity.

The poem identifies two distinct (and opposed) kinds of perfection: the perfection that orients Mayer toward some different way of living, and the invocation of "perfection" to bolster existing social structures, as when "the dream or vision of perfection like romances of families, fails you" (33). In "Cista Mistica," Mayer writes of Demeter, "I guess she was a good mother, I'll find out later," and returns to the myth later in the poem:

> She had said oh you inane mortals you are always fucking things up by not knowing whether what's happening is good or bad. That was when she threw the baby in the fire. Worse luck might be one's intensity inadvertently turning into comedy because of being lonely. But we all know she would've turned him into an immortal being, the child had been growing without any food. (33-34)

In this myth is an instance of care being misread: Demeter, caring for the baby Demophon, seeks to make him immortal by anointing him with ambrosia rather than feeding him and by exposing him to fire. Demophon's mother, Metanira, witnesses the latter and the process of making-immortal is interrupted. The myth is often read as pointing to the limits of mortal understanding—Metanira sees the gift of immortality as harm—but an inverse reading is possible, too: Demeter fails to understand that Metanira wants to preserve her son's mortality. In either case, this leap between human and divine logics of care resonates with the poem's "orb of perfection" that is opposed to the "vision of perfection like romances of families." That is, Mayer's prose poems, like Boyer's, work to outline some way of caring for each other, inside or outside of a "family," that challenges families as they now exist. As Demeter's plan for Demophon is beyond the understanding of the baby's mortal family, but signaling some greater possibility, Mayer's poems suggest that it is not clear what good mothering is. Her later claim, "I prefer to feel perfect that's why I might be called a lunatic" again mobilizes the concept of perfection, when *felt* by a mother-writer whose money is running out, to imagine another way of being (a person or a family) (34). The poem's title, "Cista Mistica," alludes to the cista mystica, a sacred box or basket used in the ancient Greek festivals of Demeter and Dionysus (Smith et. al.). These boxes, which were kept closed in public, gesture toward the unknowability of the divine. Mayer mobilizes this unknowability toward a sense of openness, much in the way that

Judith Butler reads Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on the theologian Nicolas Malebranche as pointing toward a generative lacunae at the site of the self; in both cases, the invocation of divinity or mysticism allows access to a "necessary obscurity," the acknowledgement that "our origins are permanently enigmatic to us and that this enigma forms the condition of our self-understanding" (*Senses* 60).

Mayer "prefer[s] to feel perfect" though austerity politics, intensifying in America in 1979 and 1980, when Mayer wrote *Desires*, would have her feel anxious, precarious, and ashamed. In "Pregnancy Mask," Mayer's speaker considers the possibilities in refusing austerity: "If it is the only money we can get and it's a little too much, we'll use it up rather than save it" and "Whenever we buy some food it disappears right away, unlike Jack Kerouac's food" (139-140). In this anti-frugal ethic is a refusal to be disciplined by an economy that does not value poetry: to save, or invest, or live within one's means, or get a job that pays more than poetry. Nelson claims that "the overriding obsession of *Desires* is economy: the economy of personal finance; the economy of time measurement, especially the time it takes to write and the time it takes to gestate; and, overwhelmingly, the economy of language production" and points out that Mayer's work manifests an underexplored capacity of poetry, maximalism: "traditionally speaking, poetry is by definition an art of measurement—of placing syllables into circulation and withholding them . . . But Mayer's work reminds us that humans also take great pleasure in experiencing time, money, bodily sensations, and/or words that also feel somehow impermeable to measurement" (127). Mayer's poems demonstrate that something does not have to be scarce to be valuable—that poems that fill their pages with words (too many for the mimeograph machine) train our attention as much as pared-down forms. In other words, the poems deny that Mayer cheapens her words by producing more of them. The poems, in their magnitude, also offer a

rebuke to the notion that "you won't have time to write if you have a family" (*Desires* 64). Rather than accept that poems must be slim, that money must be saved, that having children means finding remunerative work, Mayer's poems live outside of these logics of austerity and take pleasure in doing so.

Writing in 2019 about her 1971 multimedia project, *Memory*, in which she shot a roll of film every day in the month of July, wrote a long poem to accompany each day's images, and recorded her voice reciting the six hours of text, Mayer remarks,

> I thought by using both sound and image, I could include everything, but so far, that is not so. Then and now, I thought that if there were a computer or device that could record everything you think or see, even for a single day, that would make an interesting piece of language/information, but it seems like we are walking backward since everything that becomes popular is a very small part of the experience of being human, as if it were all too much for us. (*Memory* 7)

Mayer's poems challenge us to notice everything we see—impossible, but a challenge that might render the world differently. Her work, like Boyer's, maintains that an especially neglected "part of the experience of being human" is care. When care is understood to be primary and generative, rather than peripheral or supplementary, then, in an inversion of Endnotes's "diffus[ion]" of the private realm across "the entire social landscape," care might travel between people and spaces to animate a new public. As Boyer writes, "No one will ever confuse home for the enemy of art, or a woman with a home" (*Handbook* 134). Boyer's and Mayer's writing insists that for art to "inven[t] . . . sensible forms and material structures for a life to come," as Rancière puts it, it must emerge from embodied relations of care, which reparatively resist late capitalism's extraction and disavowal of these relations.

Chapter 2

Care Beyond the Family after the Civil Rights Movement[22]

In the early days of Black Lives Matter, commentators speculated on the links and discontinuities between the movement and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Writing in March 2016, Jelani Cobb claimed that BLM "eschews hierarchy and centralized leadership" and pointed out that while this seems to set the movement at odds with how the Civil Rights movement is popularly remembered, historians of the movement had shifted their focus to "the contributions of women, local activists, and small organizations—the lesser-known elements that enabled the grand moments we associate with the civil-rights era" (Cobb). Cobb drew a direct line from historically marginalized figures of the Civil Rights movement, like Ella Baker, to BLM, arguing that "Black Lives Matter emerged as a modern extension of Ella Baker's thinking—a preference for ten thousand candles rather than a single spotlight. In a way, they created the context and the movement created itself."

In his discussion of Black Lives Matter's relationship to liberal politics, Cobb comes close to but does not dwell on the question of black respectability. Cobb notes that an early BLM organizer, Aislin Pulley, declined a meeting with President Obama, while other BLM activists accepted, and he quotes Alicia Garza (who, along with Patrice Cullors, coined the phrase "black lives matter" in 2013) on Obama's lukewarm response to racial violence: "Barack Obama comes out after Trayvon is murdered and does this weird, half-ass thing where he's, like, 'That could've been my son,' and at the same time he starts scolding young black men." Garza refers to a

[22] Sections from this chapter appeared in the article, "Bernadette Mayer's *Utopia* as a Model for Care During Crisis," published in *Feminist Theory* 23, vol. 2 (2022).

section of Obama's speech when, after calling for racial bias training for police officers and a reconsideration of "stand your ground" laws, he says,

> we need to spend some time in thinking about how do we bolster and reinforce our African American boys. And this is something that Michelle and I talk a lot about. There are a lot of kids out there who need help who are getting a lot of negative reinforcement. And is there more that we can do to give them the sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them? (Obama 2013)

It's hard to know what these comments might mean in the context of Trayvon Martin's murder: don't wear hoodies? Such nods to the pathology of black masculinity became a trademark of Obama's most memorable speeches, which often criticized structural racism but almost always included a moment of concession to Obama's white, liberal-centrist base. In his often-cited 2008 speech responding to the Reverend Wright scandal, for example, Obama mentions discriminatory lending practices and the exclusion of black workers from unions but also points to welfare itself as a possible culprit in America's race problem: "A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family contributed to the erosion of black families — a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened" (Obama 2008).[23] Whether or not Obama actually believes that welfare is bad for black people, it is telling that this is the target he chooses. Obama's dig at welfare is well-calculated to appeal to white moderates who want to point to

[23] During Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, comments that his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, made after 9/11 came under scrutiny, particularly his comment (attributed to an Iraqi ambassador, but also alluding to Malcolm X), that the attacks represented "America's chickens . . . coming home to roost" ("Reverend Wright"; Malcolm X). The media uproar led Obama to leave the church (Powell).

something other than white supremacy (that is, their own privilege) that subjugates black Americans, and to do so without being "racist."

The shadow of the Moynihan Report is long indeed if a progressive black president speaks in a similar idiom forty years later. Certainly, Daniel Patrick Moynihan was less interested than Obama in the structural causes of inequality, but their claims about the relationship between welfare and "the black family" are disturbingly consonant. As Moynihan wrote in 1965 of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), "The steady expansion of this welfare program . . . can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States" (qtd. in Cooper 38). Melinda Cooper argues that AFDC, while never a significant portion of the national budget, "became the touchstone for increasingly acrimonious debates about the very feasibility of welfare distribution" in the 1970s because it was perceived to undermine the nuclear family. Breaking with left critics who interpret social conservatism "as a useful distraction from the real business of cutting funding to public education and the arts," Cooper insists that the economic policies of neoliberalism *require* (the fiction of) a stable, financially-secure heterosexual family (22). For this reason, actors across the neoliberal political spectrum unite against threats to "the family."

Black Feminism Against the Family

As the movement for Black Lives enters a new phase, what might be gained from reconsidering the black feminist activism that emerged from and challenged the earlier Civil Rights movement? This chapter tracks an important but neglected strain of black feminism that is critical of the nuclear family. I read Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* (1976) and, briefly, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), along with essays by Bambara and Audre Lorde, to

demonstrate how black feminist writers of the 1970s imagined care outside the nuclear family. These feminists rejected the privilege of white maternity, expressed as having "property" in children or having one's labor exploited as a fulltime homemaker. Instead, they envision care and healing happening in public, often through political movements. In doing so, they engage critically with traditional narratives of motherhood, either rejecting biological reproduction altogether, in the case of *Meridian*, or breaking open the isolated nuclear family, as in *The Salt Eaters*.

While families can be places of healing for people of color, I demonstrate in this chapter that early black feminist writing registers the nuclear family as a repressive political force, particularly in the way that it defuses or obstructs political organizing and, in some cases, pits women against each other. *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters* seek a healing and caring practice that is firmly outside the family. Therefore, when these novels imagine intergenerational women's alliances, they do so outside the frame of genealogy. Both novels, and Bambara's and Lorde's essays, consider the exhaustion and grief of women working in the ongoing movement against racial violence. Both novels figure the process of healing from this grief *as* the continued movement; that is, the work of healing is political work.

The novels thus consider the question of what it means to care for oneself in the context of revolution. The concept of self-care, so prominent today among privileged subjects, began in black feminism as a way of articulating that for a minoritarian subject, as Audre Lorde puts it, caring for oneself "is an act of political warfare" ("Burst" 131). In this chapter, I consider how black feminist writing of the 1970s sets out a form of self-care, and even "self-possession," that that is relational and intersubjective. This self-care is linked to a notion of "letting go" that, I argue, positions black women's subjectivity outside the framework of motherhood as a property

claim to one's children. By refusing children as property, the mothers and non-mothers in the writing I consider in this chapter also refuse the erasure that happens when a woman becomes a mother.

The black feminist subjectivity I trace in this chapter, organized around "self-possession" and "letting go," might also be said to revisit and revise the gender distinction asserted as black Americans became citizens in the 19th century. Hortense Spillers traces the "ungendering" of enslaved people through the denial of both maternal privilege and the father's name, arguing that "even though the enslaved female reproduced other enslaved persons," it is not possible to "read 'birth' in this instance as a reproduction of mothering precisely because the female, like the male, has been robbed of the parental rights, the parental function" ("Mama's Baby" 77-78). Against this ungendering, Robyn Wiegman claims, abolitionist arguments for the humanity of enslaved people often turned on gender difference; to be fully human was to be male or female. As a result, "[f]or the African (-American) in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries . . . the ability to be gendered marked the entrance to the human, public community, providing both civic roles (such as the reproduction of mothering) while simultaneously fragmenting citizenship according to a deeply exclusive masculine universalism" (68).

Writing in 1987, Spillers looks back at the history of enslavement in order to outline a new future of gender. Reflecting on the Moynihan Report and stereotypes of the black matriarch, she argues that while the convergence of a supposedly pathologically powerful maternity and the denial, in slavery, of the mother-child relationship has been used to harm black Americans, there is also an opportunity in the fact that the black woman is placed "out of the traditional symbolics of female gender" ("Mama's Baby" 80). "We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness," Spillers writes, "than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject"

("Mama's Baby" 80). In the background of Spillers's analysis is the upswell of anti-blackness in arguments against welfare. Through the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond, U.S. lawmakers successfully deployed anti-black racism to mobilize Americans against welfare, depicting reproduction as irresponsible and mothers as parasitic, particularly through the figure of the black "welfare queen," who, as Dorothy Roberts argues, "represents laziness, chicanery, and economic burden all wrapped up in one powerful image" (111). Black women should respond to this vilification of black mothers, Spillers suggests, not by demanding the privileges accorded to white women in the family, but rather by seeing what kind of subjectivity is possible outside of patriarchal gender. In other words, how might black feminists claim "female empowerment" outside of "the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" (80)? By offering a vision of social care, the black feminist texts I consider in this chapter reject the privilege of maternity that comes with induction into American civic life and that assumes a privatized nuclear family. The black feminist "self-possession" that this writing articulates is non-sovereign and social; it is "survival" that includes living joyfully.

This vision of "self-possession," forged in social life and non-sovereign, directly contests the neoliberal concept of self-reliance that would come to dominate American political culture in the decades after these novels were written, helping to erode political gains made by feminists, workers, people of color, and queer activists. As Melinda Cooper argues, the rugged individualism promoted by the architects of neoliberalism always assumes a family: "critics of neoliberalism have failed to recognize that [Milton] Friedman and his Chicago school colleagues posit the self-sufficient family as much as the individual as a basic manifestation of the free-market order" (57). According to Cooper, neoliberals and social conservatives have always agreed on family-promotion and have opposed government programs, like Aid to Families with

Dependent Children (AFDC), that might weaken "family" bonds (such as that of a woman to the father of her child). This fact has been missed by scholarship that conflates neoliberalism with the "free market" itself and thus assumes that "neoliberalism" doesn't particularly care about your gender identity or marital status, but submits everyone to the brutal logic of capitalism. Cooper insists, rather, that "[i]f the history of modern capital appears on the one hand to regularly undermine and challenge existing orders of gender and sexuality, it also entails the periodic reinvention of the family as an instrument for distributing wealth and income" (17). Along these lines, Cooper points out that the Freedman's Bureau, the government program set up to provide temporary assistance to black people after emancipation, took a marked "interest in marriage promotion" in order to shift the burden of care from the state onto families. "In this way," Cooper argues, "African Americans were unceremoniously inducted into the poor-law tradition of legally enforceable family responsibility at the very moment they were welcomed into the world of contractual freedom" (81). *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters*, and Lorde's essays recognize that the aim of the government-enforced family is to privatize care and weaken movements that seek to distribute care across society. Their vision of liberation is social care, happening in public.

The Family After the Civil Rights Movement

Meridian and *The Salt Eaters* dramatize the complex relationship between healing, politics, and reproduction in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. Debates about reproduction and race would play out in feminist theory in the 1980 and 90s, and these discussions are often remembered better than the claims made by black feminists in the 1970s. I revisit this earlier crest of black feminism to point to its perspectives on reproductive work,

biological kinship, revolution, and race, which challenge some contemporary characterizations of black feminism as "pro-family."

Patricia Hill Collins argued in 1993 that for women of color, "maternal separation from one's children becomes a much more salient issue than maternal isolation with one's children within an allegedly private nuclear family," pointing to inadequate access to medical care, work outside the home, and the forcible separation of mother and child, historically and in the present. Collins also pointed to sterilization and assimilation as threats to "racial ethnic women's struggles for empowerment" (318-320). Writing against white feminist theory that emphasized abortion rights and the politics of the heterosexual family, Collins put pressure on the different experiences of many women of color, which, she claimed, are delimited by racial and class inequality more than by "patriarchy" in the abstract.

This context was urgently needed in a feminist field that claimed the experiences of middle-class white women as universal. But by labeling the nuclear family a lower-order concern, Collins ended up obscuring some dimensions of women of color feminism that novels like *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters* elucidate—dimensions important to Collins herself. Describing the experience of mothering in communities of color, Collins uses the term "motherwork" to describe the work of care "whether it is on behalf of one's own biological children, or for the children of one's own racial ethnic community, or to preserve the earth for those children who are yet unborn" (313). Such work, across or beyond biological reproduction, is borne out in Walker's and Bambara's novels. But to see this work clearly, it is also necessary to critically consider certain areas of the lives of women of color which Collins's analysis idealizes, such as heterosexual relationships and the relationships between mothers and daughters. *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters*, and black feminist theory from the 1970s and 1980s

demonstrate that the politics of heterosexuality, the constrictions of the nuclear family, and access to abortion and contraception are not "white women's issues," but rather important to all women. While maintaining that solidarity within one's racial ethnic community is essential, the novels insist that this cannot happen *only* within the family.

Reading these novels also makes clear that the notion of self-care developed in black feminism necessitates a rethinking of the nuclear family. For example, Audre Lorde's essays from this time insist upon the interconnectedness of family and community (defined both locally and globally). Lorde's experience of motherhood is inextricable from her understanding of racism and homophobia, and she defines black motherhood as the modeling of a finely tuned balance between love and resistance:

> Raising Black children—female and male—in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot love and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive. And in order to survive they must let go. This is what mothers teach—love, survival—that is, self-definition and letting go. ("Man Child" 74)

In order to keep doing the work of resistance, black people must care for themselves enough not to be consumed by anger. Black care, for Lorde, involves both "self-definition" and what would seem to be its opposite, "letting go." Lorde further develops the relationship between self-care, survival, and anti-racist activism in her diaries from her second bout with cancer. Like Anne Boyer in *The Undying*, Lorde understands cancer not as an individual illness but a political phenomenon. Furthermore, Lorde defines "survival" not as outliving one's illness, but rather as living and dying well. Lorde also situates her work to live well during (that is, "survive") this illness as part of her lifelong work for racial, gender, and sexual liberation. This work leads her to reflect critically on her parents' inability to transform their anger at living under white

supremacy, noting that her father "died of inchoate rage" and that her mother "would beat [her] until she wept from weariness" ("Turning the Beat" 45).

Lorde's description of her family, strained by the violence of racism, explodes the notion of the family as refuge, as people's first and last line of care. It thus rebukes Victorian notions of the family as insulated from the worries of the world (such as the brutality of white supremacy and capitalism). In discussions of motherhood, however, feminists sometimes become caught on the public-private binary that they seek to undo. Writing in 1990, bell hooks notes that "it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination" ("Homeplace" 267). In an earlier essay, hooks situates this homemaking as a political act that necessarily complicates white feminists' discussion of reproductive work as limiting to women, writing, "Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claims black people were incapable of expressing" ("Revolutionary Parenting" 145). This context is necessary, but at times in her analysis, hooks risks reifying the work-home distinction, as when she claims that "[h]ad black women voiced their views on motherhood" early in the "contemporary women's liberation movement," "it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education and a number of other issues would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood" (145). What the novels of Bambara and Walker make clear, however, is that black feminists of the 1970s and 1980s did not seek empowerment through private domestic space. While it is true that black women's domestic work has involved a "political commitment to racial uplift, to eradicating racism, which was the

philosophical core of dedication to community and home" ("Homeplace" 269-70), looking beyond the "homeplace" that hooks describes is also necessary. (In fact, hooks complicates her own analysis of black domestic space in her essay, "Revolutionary Parenting," which argues for social, communal childrearing [152-55].) Writing in 1970, for example, Frances Beale points out that "[s]ome young sisters who have never had to maintain a household and accept the confining role which this entails tend to romanticize (along with the help of a few brothers) this role of housewife and mother" (113). Beale claims that this "attitude . . . is adopted from a bourgeois white model."

The tendency among *some* scholars of black feminism to idealize black domestic space has led to a limited understanding of the political work done by early black feminist organizers. Wilson Sherwin and Frances Fox Piven argue that by focusing on National Welfare Rights Organization activists' validation of "motherhood and care labor," scholarship on the NWRO, established in the late 1960s, misses "the more vibrant and insightful analyses welfare activists offered" (138). Instead, Sherwin and Piven claim, NWRO activists emphasized their commitment to unpaid community organizing, a kind of work that is neither waged nor domestic. Sherwin and Piven quote the 1968 testimony to Congress of a recipient activist who says that she rejects a job like house cleaning "because I feel I am more valuable and I can do something else," namely "the nitty-gritty stuff that is out into the community, mixing with the people, finding out what their problems are, and trying to help solve those problems" (139). Like the protagonist of *Meridian*, this activist argues that the work of care that is most valuable to her is care for her community. She points to neither waged work nor motherhood as that which qualifies her for government assistance (though she may well have been a mother), but rather unpaid work in the community. As Sherwin and Piven argue, welfare activists "often did not

appeal to a Black maternalist logic arguing for the importance of care labor provided by mothers, but rather the necessity and relevance of community engagement" (139).

In sum, while black women rightfully chafed against white feminists' valorization of waged work as liberating, and while, as Sherwin and Piven acknowledge, "poor Black women . . . were often denied the racialized benefits of maternalism" (138), an overemphasis on the cultivation of domestic space in black communities misses the distinct cultivation of *social* care by early black feminists. Following Kimberly Springer's call to understand black feminism as a parallel rather than responsive or reactive development to white feminism of the 1970s, I look back to earlier black feminist texts of the 1970s and 1980s to point to a black feminist articulation of social care (Springer 3-4). Black feminists have always argued for radical reconfigurations of family and caregiving, but the reception of this theory has underemphasized these issues. The elision of black feminist critiques of the family and motherhood continues into the present, as Jennifer Nash points out:

> In a moment in which the booming maternal memoir genre roots itself in mapping white maternal ambivalence, in treating motherhood as a space that takes—perhaps even steals—from women, black maternal testimonies obsessively track motherhood as a site of spiritual and psychic renewal and steadfastly refuse to document the violence of motherhood apart from the threat of state violence. I find myself wondering: is there space for maternal unhappiness in the black feminist theoretical maternal archive, space for accounts of motherhood that find mothering profoundly unradical, perhaps even tedious, exhausting, or upsetting? ("Political Life" 711)

Nash points to *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, edited by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams, among other recent texts, and notes that "[Alice]

Walker's long-standing engagement with the challenges of the (black) female artist mother" tends not to be cited in "the 'revolutionary mothering' discourse" (711). Does the understandable desire of black feminists to distinguish their experiences from hegemonic (white, affluent) motherhood narratives end up obscuring black maternal experiences? Nash also asks about "the place of 1970s feminist conversations about reproductive labor—particularly the ways that rhetoric of love, care, and obligation can obscure labor—in this iteration of black feminist conversations about motherhood" (712).

Today, feminists are looking back to 1970s critiques of the family. M.E. O'Brien outlines the history of the Anglophone family over the last two hundred years, through industrialization, the rise and fall of the workers' movement, and the neoliberal present. O'Brien argues that in the mid-nineteenth century, for both European proletarians and enslaved black people, "capitalism had . . . destroyed the working-class family," and the workers' movement subsequently missed an opportunity when it sought to rebuild this family (for white workers). The family wage gestured toward property-ownership, the promise of which O'Brien argues was a crucial means of dividing the proletariat racially. "White identity," O'Brien argues, "even for proletarians, was constituted through the possibility of property ownership, and identification with the country's major landowners" (387).[24] Across the twentieth century, the single-family home is a crucial object (both ideal and concrete) in the delineation of class and race. As the workers' movement demanded the right to own a home rather than a society in which no one would need a family to survive, whiteness, respectability, and family values became more closely entwined.

[24] Dolores Hayden has also traced how federal investment in suburban single-family home construction protected white supremacy and discouraged radicalism among workers ("What Would" S172-73), and Kim Phillips-Fein points out that as more beneficiaries of these federal investments came to own homes in growing cities in the "suburban sun belt," the "open white supremacy" of mid-century America morphed into a "homeowners' philosophy of individual rights, meritocracy, and property ownership" (731).

O'Brien situates radical feminism, black feminism, and gay liberation in opposition to this working-class reinforcement of the family. These movements recognized that popular liberation could happen only by abolishing the family as an economic unit, and thus they rejected "the masculinity embraced by the left . . . the heterosexual nuclear family and the miseries of suburban life, and . . . work itself" (390). Bambara's and Walker's novels recover a black feminist interest in family abolition during the decline of the workers' movement and the consolidation of neoliberalism. The novels demonstrate an awareness that proletarian liberation struggles—whether a workers' movement or the movement for black liberation—cannot appeal to a family form that has always served capitalism, privatizing care, excluding queer and trans subjects, and subjecting women and children to violence.

Care Outside the Home

Though Meridian, the protagonist of Walker's novel, recognizes that the black family can be a site of care and empowerment—that "freedom" for her post-emancipation foremothers "meant they could keep their own children" (90)—the novel considers the ways in which the nuclear family is insufficient for black women's freedom. Walker's and Bambara's novels highlight an earlier (pre-1980s) black feminist negotiation of the private-public divide. The novels insist that self-care is necessary for black women doing political work, and that this self-care happens in a space between private and public. This notion of self-care challenges, on the one hand, an idealized nuclear family, and on the other hand, a later concept of self-care that encourages retreat from public, political life. The self-care articulated in these novels proposes, furthermore, a notion of black survival that does not require biological reproduction. *Meridian* in particular envisions black women's freedom through means other than motherhood.

Though Walker's strong critique of white feminism is remembered well, Barbara Christian reminds us that Walker "also writes of the unwillingness of many black women to acknowledge or address the problems of sexism that affect them because they feel they must protect black men. She asserts that if black women turn away from the women's movement, they turn away from women moving all over the world, not just in America" (91). This "women's movement," of course, must be changed profoundly. Walker frames her critique of white feminism through the experience of motherhood, supposing that the white woman "fears knowing that black women want the best for their children just as she does. . . . Better then to deny that the black woman has a vagina. Is capable of motherhood. Is a woman" ("One Child" 374). At the same time, Christian points out that while Walker's writing acknowledges behind "the monumental myth of black motherhood" the real strength of black women against forces that sought to destroy them, it asserts that this myth "is also restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of black women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice and hardly admits the many who were destroyed" (89). In other words, Walker's work considers how to acknowledge the healing and strength black mothers provide while not valorizing biological reproduction.

In *Meridian*, there is no tradition and certainly no family form, or "homeplace," that guarantees black survival. This is made literal in Meridian's movement toward asceticism, so that in the portion of the novel set in the 1970s, she lives in a house whose only furnishings are a hotplate, a sleeping bag, some dried flowers, and (as I will discuss later) poems and letters tacked to the walls. While not denying that the kind of nurturance traced in hooks's "Homeplace" is valuable, *Meridian* works against the stereotype of the heroically domestic black matriarch, envisioning care for the black community as non-domestic: as happening in public.

The Salt Eaters also addresses the relationship between self-care, family life, and racial politics. Like Meridian, Velma in *The Salt Eaters* experiences exhaustion from political activism as illness. Though Velma arguably experiences a nervous breakdown, coming to the healer, Minnie Ransom, after having attempted suicide, the novel situates this illness in the body. During the healing, Minnie Ransom (aided by her spirit guide, Old Wife) never loses contact with Velma's body. Like *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters* proposes that the body is integral to the process of healing the wounds of the Civil Rights movement. The novels therefore make two related claims: that worldviews that separate mind and body are false and damaging; and that sexual difference must be attended to in the movement for racial justice. Their vision of freedom is embodied and non-sovereign, while still being "self-possessed." Furthermore, in *The Salt Eaters*, the solution to activist burnout is not a retreat to the nuclear family or to an individualistic brand of New Age culture, but rather a public, communal healing practice that, while drawing upon the traditions of African medicine women, does not idealize the past, the family, or domestic space.

Meridian's Body

The cultural conflation of care with motherhood is so persistent that it confuses even readings of a novel whose protagonist unequivocally refuses motherhood in order to care for the people in her community. Susan Danielson represents Meridian's character arc as one of venturing out and returning, as if there is an a priori community (of either the Civil Rights Movement or black women) to which Meridian can return. She claims that both Meridian and Lynne, the white student activist who moves south in the 1960s, initially "rejec[t] the communities which gave them nurture," but it is unclear what kind of nurture this is (Danielson

327). Meridian never rejects the "organized civil rights movement" that Danielson identifies as Meridian's community, and Lynne becomes estranged from her parents after they refuse to accept her marriage to a black man. Danielson understands Meridian's community organizing in relation to her relationship to her own mother, claiming that Meridian "draw[s] solace and support from women of her community, her mother and Miss Winter, a teacher at Spellman [sic] College who was raised in Meridian's hometown" (324). In the moment in question, Meridian, afflicted for the first time by the mysterious illness that will be with her for years, mistakes Miss Winter for her mother and tells her she loves her, and asks her to "let [her] go." Miss Winter, intuitively interpreting the troubled mother-daughter dynamic, tells Meridian, "I forgive you" (Walker 131).

Because Meridian gets well and continues to work in small towns in the south, Danielson concludes that her mother and Miss Winter are supportive; in fact, Meridian's mother is supportive of neither Meridian nor the Civil Rights movement, and Miss Winter, the teacher at Saxon College (a fictionalized Spelman, perhaps), is an ambivalent figure. On the one hand, Miss Winter validates Meridian's alienation after a high school speech competition in which Meridian freezes while delivering a speech "that extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of The American Way of Life" (126). Meridian's mother dismisses Meridian's explanation that the speech's falseness prevented her from continuing, but Miss Winter overhears and tells Meridian, "It's the same one they made me learn when I was here . . . and it's no more true now than it was then" (127). On the other hand, when Miss Winter hears that Meridian has been admitted to Saxon, she is dismayed: "She had enjoyed being the only person from her town to attend such a college; she did not wish to share this distinction" (126).

And yet Danielson concludes from Meridian's dream and subsequent recovery that her "essential ties to a black female community can . . . never be broken" (324).

Reading the novel as a recovery of the "essential" ties to one's family or ethnic or gender community erases the question that animates Walker's novel: how to articulate black womanhood without invoking a traditional expression of black motherhood. Without access to a nurturing black matriarch, Meridian develops her own model of care outside the nuclear family. Authority figures in *Meridian*, such as parents, teachers, and distinguished members of the movement, are often disappointing, if not absurd or abusive, and so reading Meridian's or Lynne's narratives as healing returns to their "heritage" (Danielson 328) misses the novel's radical attempt to build a new apparatus of care specific to the struggles for racial and gender justice of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond.

The Body, Reproduction, and "Survival"

Meridian's refusal of motherhood—and the pain involved in this refusal—has led other critics to read a dualism into the novel, with Meridian rejecting her body itself. Meridian's relationship to her body is complicated, particularly as it relates to sexuality and reproduction. She experiences her first sexual intercourse neutrally; she is aware of being neither excited by nor opposed to her high school boyfriend's desire to have sex with her, though he notes that her legs, during sex, are "like somebody starched them shut" (60). The novel then recounts two earlier instances that might be described as sexual abuse, though Meridian's experience of them, between curiosity, interest, and disgust, is ambivalent. As I will discuss later, Meridian experiences her teenage pregnancy as a double betrayal: of her body against her(self), and by her

mother, whose only counsel on reproduction, “Be sweet,” is intended as an exhortation to abstinence but is incomprehensible to Meridian (86).

Meridian’s first clear occasion of sexual desire is when she has sex with Truman, a fellow worker in the Civil Rights movement. Wanting to refuse Truman, who has dropped Meridian in the past in favor of white women, but feeling attracted to him, Meridian separates mind from body: “Indeed, she felt, and carefully noted it, as if the entire center of her body was beginning to melt. She decided to click her mind off, and her body seemed to move into his of its own accord” (117). When she becomes pregnant by this single encounter, Meridian endures a painful abortion from a doctor who offers to sterilize her in exchange for sex. Truman, who is now dating one of the white women, never learns of the abortion: “It enraged her that she could be made to endure such pain, and that he was oblivious to it. She was also disgusted by the fecundity of her body that got pregnant on less screwing than anybody’s she had ever heard of. It seemed doubly unfair that after all her sexual ‘experience’ and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex” (119). It is fair to conclude that sexuality is a problem for Meridian. Furthermore, Meridian’s difficult relationship with her mother is represented as a problem of embodiment. After giving up her two-year-old son for adoption when she is awarded a scholarship to attend college, Meridian experiences guilt physically. As I will discuss later, Meridian struggles to situate her refusal of motherhood in the history of black motherhood, and her guilt over giving up her son is tied up with her discord with her mother, “on whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt” (96). Enduring exhaustion and police brutality in the movement in the early 1960s, Meridian feels “as if her body, growing frailer every day under the stress of her daily life, stood in the way of a reconciliation between her mother and that part of her own soul her mother could, perhaps, love. She valued her body less,

attended to it less, because she hated its obstruction" (96-97). For this reason, Meridian experiences a kind of masochism, looking forward to encounters with the police with "an inner gaiety, a sense of freedom, as she saw the clubs slashing down on her from above" (97). During Meridian's later illness, she eats very little and loses her hair.[25] For all these reasons, Alan Nadel locates an "antagonism, for Meridian, between mind and body" and concludes that "[t]he more she is able to shed not only of her personal property but also of her person itself—the flesh of her body, the aborted fetus of her womb—the more power she has to control and heal those around her . . ." (61, 63).

I argue, however, that such a reading ignores powerful moments of mind-body integration in Meridian's life and that the antagonism expressed *through* Meridian's body is not so much a crisis of the body as a crisis of motherhood. A closer reading of the novel suggests that the problem is not reproduction itself but rather the institution of motherhood in its current form, which the novel seeks to reconfigure. By the end of the novel, Meridian has developed a concept of "survival" that is aligned with Audre Lorde's and that allows Meridian to reclaim the body that has troubled her.

> The history of black motherhood looms large for Meridian after she gives up her child: Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from "Freedom" was that it meant they could keep their own children. . . . She thought of her mother as being worthy

[25] Though Meridian eats little, it is not clear that this is, as one critic has it, "anorexia" (Tucker 5), since the illness also involves paralysis and hallucinations and, when read literally, loses some of its valence as an embodied expression of the stress of the Civil Rights movement.

> of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (90)

Having given up her child, Meridian feels alienated from a community of black women defined, in part, by its previous exclusion from the privileges of motherhood. What the novel suggests, however, is that freedom for black women must be defined *not* by the obligatory embrace of the privileges once denied them, but rather by the construction of networks of care outside the nuclear family.

Meridian never bonds with her child. In fact, in a direct refutation of the idea that freedom for black women means embracing maternal privilege, Meridian experiences the first months of her son's life as "slavery" and "began to dream each night . . . of ways to murder him" (65). To suppress these thoughts, Meridian also thinks about killing herself. Infanticide is a recurrent theme in the novel. For example, a legend of Saxon College holds that "a young girl named Mary" gave birth alone in one of the campus buildings, having concealed her pregnancy, and "had carefully chopped the infant into bits and fed it into the commode" (35). The infant remains are discovered, Mary is beaten and expelled, and her parents lock her in a windowless room, after which Mary commits suicide.

Beyond the girl's name and her hagiographic moniker, "Fast Mary of the Tower," the legend of Fast Mary also has a religious valence in the way it is passed on by Saxon students: "Any girl who had every prayed for her period to come was welcome to the commemoration, which was held in the guise of a slow May Day dance around the foot of The Sojourner (which had been, it was said, Fast Mary's only comfort and friend on Saxon campus). It was the only time in all the many social activities at Saxon that every girl was considered equal" (35). An anti-Virgin Mary, Fast Mary unites other young women who understand that an unwanted pregnancy

would end their lives, even if not literally. While Mary is "too ashamed" to ask for help during her baby's birth, Meridian is crippled by shame when she gives her child up; she, too, feels excluded from the community of black women. I read this cult of Fast Mary as a powerful insistence on making visible unwanted pregnancy, which mid-century respectable American society is desperate to hide. That the class- and color-stratified student body of Saxon College comes together solely around the issue of pregnancy suggests that there is an opportunity for alliance around the taboo of women's sexuality and reproduction.

Rethinking Black Motherhood

In response to Meridian's decision to place her son for adoption, Meridian's mother declares that motherhood cannot be refused: "You should *want* Eddie Jr. . . . Unless you're some kind of monster. And no daughter of mine is a monster, surely" (88). Mrs. Hill's own experience of unwanted motherhood is in the background, or perhaps the foreground, of her belief in motherhood as an intractable duty: "'You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children,' she continued self-righteously, 'though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised every one myself'" (88). There is a missed opportunity here: while Mrs. Hill's frank acknowledgement of her lack of desire to be a mother could lead her to share experience, knowledge, or sympathy with Meridian, her response is punitive instead.

The novel elsewhere recalls Mrs. Hill's early life: extreme poverty and sacrifices by her mother which allowed her to finish high school:

> In the final days of [Mrs. Hill's] young adulthood she had known the luxury of lying in bed as late as nine or ten o'clock on Saturdays, and the joy of earning money as a schoolteacher. She had known the freedom of thinking out the possibilities of her life.

> They were actually two: She might stay in her home town and teach or she might move elsewhere and teach. She never tired of considering what she might do. . . . She could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children. (40-41)

Though, as a black woman in prewar America, Mrs. Hill's prospects are limited, they are expansive relative to the community in which she grew up. The narrative recounts that Mrs. Hill senses that "the mothers of her pupils, no matter that they envied her her clothes, her speech, her small black car, pitied her" for being childless (41). After she has children, she reflects that "[t]he mysterious inner life" that she had imagined in these mothers is "simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children. They, too, had found no one to whom to shout, 'It's not fair!'" (42). Mrs. Hill's account points to the lack of communication among women: observing motherhood as the norm, Mrs. Hill imagines that the look in mothers' eyes communicates pity of her non-normative (single, working) state. After becoming a mother, she understands this look to express the loss of life: motherhood as a kind of death. Significantly, each conclusion is a guess; the women never discuss their experiences of motherhood.

Furthermore, Mrs. Hill's use of the word "myself" to indicate how she raised her children, by which she intends, perhaps, to emphasize the unacceptability of giving up one's child, draws attention to the concentration of childcare onto mothers. Mrs. Hill, who is married, betrays in this word the way that heterosexual couples fail mothers. Isolated from other mothers, with whom they might share experiences (or share knowledge about avoiding motherhood altogether), and isolated from her husband by the sexual division of labor, Mrs. Hill ends up perpetuating an imprisoning experience of motherhood. She tells Meridian, "Everybody else that slips up like you did *bears* it. You're the only one that thinks you can just outright refuse . . ."

(86). The punitive nature of Mrs. Hill's sexual conservativism is of a piece with her rejection of the Civil Rights movement, of which she says, "If somebody thinks he'll have to pee when he gets to town, let him use his own toilet before he leaves home! That's what we did when I was coming up!" (83). In both cases, a desire to have the younger generation suffer as she did animates her opposition. Mrs. Hill's hostility to activism, which verges on the absurd (she also asserts that "you get just as good a view" in the back of the bus [83]), thus serves to highlight the novel's connections between anti-racist struggle and family abolition. The novel identifies the conservatism of the nuclear family as an obstacle to political struggle.

The loss of "freedom" that Mrs. Hill experiences when she marries and has children mirrors Meridian's comparison of motherhood to slavery. The nature of this freedom, too, "the luxury of lying in bed as late as nine or ten o'clock on Saturdays" in addition to fulfilling work as a teacher, resonates with a similarly brief period of leisure in Meridian's life. After Meridian and her husband separate, a few months after the baby's birth, Meridian learns that activists registering black voters have set up headquarters in her neighborhood. The next morning, she hears that the house has been firebombed in the night but that most people escaped, having kept someone on guard. Meridian is struck by the significance of this last fact: "How had they *known* they would need a guard? Did they know something she did not know? . . . And so it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world" (70).

Significantly, this event prompts Meridian to begin taking her son to her mother-in-law's house during the day. Meridian, who has dropped out of high school and does not work, spends her days with "her feet up against the windowsill in the back bedroom," where she "attempted to meditate on her condition, unconscious, at first, of what she did. . . . Her senses were stopped,

while her body rested; only in her head did she feel something, and it was a sensation of lightness—a lightness like the inside of a drum" (71). This meditation, enabled by time away from her child, marks the beginning of Meridian's political awareness. She joins the movement, receives the scholarship to attend college, and, against her mother's wishes, "outright refuse[s]" motherhood. The novel thus points to the fact that the feminist movement of the 1970s applied tactics learned from the Civil Rights movement. The revolutionary organizing of the student activists in her community spurs Meridian's political awakening, which, among other things, is feminist. The difference in Meridian's and her mother's experiences, while certainly attributable to personality, can also be traced to Meridian's access to a framework of liberation, or refusal. Unlike her mother, Meridian refuses to sit in the back of the bus, refuses motherhood, and refuses paid work. Again, this aligns with Sherwin and Piven's argument that National Welfare Rights Organization activists asserted not their right to work low-wage jobs or their right to be good mothers, but rather their right to work in the community to end poverty and racism. In other words, the novel insists that the black liberation movement must be understood as intertwined with the movement for women's liberation, particularly via challenges to the nuclear family.

During the first stages of Meridian's political activism, when she experiences both the guilt of having given up her son and the pleasure (and exhaustion) of political struggle, Meridian associates her refusal of motherhood with the rejection of her body, as Alan Nadel notes. But it is also during this time that Meridian thinks of her mother "as Black Motherhood personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe, comprehending as she did the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for mother and for child, it had invariably meant" (96). In other words, Meridian's turn away from her body, her claim that "she hated its obstruction" comes from her equation of the black female body with her mother's logic of respectability: "be sweet," and

failing that, raise unwanted children without complaint. If this is what it means to be in a black woman's body, Meridian wants none of it. But a few crucial moments in the novel suggest that embodiment helps resolve, rather than exacerbates, this crisis of race, history, and motherhood. These moments suggest, as Spillers does, that in the wake of slavery, black motherhood must be rethought rather than simply accepted or rejected.

The novel complicates the mind-body problem in Meridian's ecstatic experience, as a child, in a Native American burial mound on her parents' farm. Meridian is curious about the mound, shaped like a serpent's coiled tail, and about her great-grandmother, who had also been drawn to the serpent's coil and who "renounced all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy" (51). In a pit at the center of the coil, Meridian sees images from her life whirling around her, senses that she has left her body, and faints. Meridian's father, who builds himself a shed in which to study maps, books, and legal documents related to Native Americans, tells Meridian that

> the Indians had constructed the coil in the serpent's tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying. The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. But she was not convinced. It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead. (53)

Rather than narrating this experience in a way that separates mind and body, Meridian proposes that such ecstasy happens not *apart from* but rather *through* the body itself, even though it may be so overwhelming that the body seems "to drop away." I read this moment as animating Meridian's later activism. Though her body becomes a problem in the instances related to sex and reproduction discussed above, and though Meridian's illness can be read as a kind of

antagonism with her body, Meridian ultimately makes a similar move toward mind and body integration in her activism. In her political work, Meridian affirms a form of "survival," both individual and communal, that clarifies questions she has had not only about the place of violence in the movement but also about the role of her own body. This survival, which I will read across *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters*, and Lorde's journals, claims bodily autonomy for black women while insisting on social care. In *Meridian*, this survival emerges from the reproductive body, as it is forged through experiences of (unwanted) pregnancy, but it is not focused on biological kinship.

When Meridian is initially asked, by a revolutionary women's group in New York in the mid-1960s, if she is willing to kill for the revolution, she is unable to say yes, which prompts the other women to call her "a coward" and "a masochist" (13). Meridian thinks of "old black men in the South" and "young girls singing in a country choir," and wonders, "If they committed murder . . . *what would the music be like*?" (14). The narrative jumps from this episode to an earlier memory of Meridian's failure to confess belief in Jesus at church with her mother. When Meridian's mother asks her to "acknowledge Him as our Master" (16), Meridian is unable to do so, and her mother's love is "gone, withdrawn, and there were conditions to be met before it would be returned" (17-18). Besides suggesting that Meridian rejects the dogmatism of both communities (her mother's church and a particular expression of radical politics), the narrative's pairing of these episodes, and a later coda**,** also point to the relationship between Meridian's politics and family forms. The black freedom movement to which Meridian devotes her life is a revolution not only of laws and public life, but of family relations. It requires that mothers no longer reproduce in their daughters the oppressions that they experienced: the shame of

motherhood, whether embraced or refused; the absence of a community of women; and love that is conditional on the confession of faith in a (masculine) Master.

After "the spring of '68," having returned to the South, Meridian begins attending church again, curious and "sens[ing] herself as an outsider" (211-12). At one church, she notices that the music has changed; one song has different lyrics, and another has a "quite martial melody" (213). The effect of this politically-charged church, where "the 'ah-mens,' rose clearly, unsentimentally, and with a firm tone of 'We are fed up,'" is mixed; the minister's intonation is so similar to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s that "at first Meridian thought his intention was to dupe or mock" (214). But a speech in this church returns Meridian to the question of revolutionary violence posed to her years earlier.

The speech, delivered by a man whose son, an activist in the movement, was murdered, is simply: "My son died" (217). Reflecting on this speech in this particular setting—the black church, which Meridian has always considered to be "mainly a reactionary power" (218)—Meridian has an epiphany: "she understood, finally, that the respect she owed to her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably *not* her own. . . . she made a promise to the red-eyed man herself: that yes, indeed she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again" (219-20). Later, Meridian amends this conviction to: "I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything, including kill, for our freedom . . . is to emerge, and flower, but I am not yet at the point of being able to kill anyone myself, nor . . . will I ever be" (220). Meridian affirms that her role will be "to walk behind the real revolutionaries" (221).

The novel's consideration of revolutionary violence is complex, and I will not address it sufficiently here, but I want to point to a process outlined in both *Meridian* and Lorde's writing

through which anger is transformed in a process of revolutionary care. Both Meridian and Lorde describe a process of "self-possession" that rejects the maternal privilege of property in one's children. For Meridian, the church is transformed from a place where a mother reproduces guilt in her daughter to the site where Meridian vows to care for the community. This happens through a kind of strategic "self-possession": "the respect she owed to her life was to continue . . . to live it, and not to give up any particle of it." In both Walker's novel and Lorde's writing, attention to one's own well-being ("self-care") leads to the survival and flourishing of the community.

Meridian's revelation outside the church is a crucial part of her recovery from the illness that plagues her intermittently during her years as an activist, causing fainting, weakness, and weight loss. The knowledge that "the respect she owed to her life was to continue . . . to live it" acts as a counterweight, perhaps, to the great losses that this illness might be said to embody: racial violence during and after the 1960s, and Meridian's foremothers' loss of their children, which Meridian experiences in guilty juxtaposition with her decision to give up her son. Audre Lorde describes something similar in her essay, "Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986":

> I knew . . . that the rage I felt and kept carefully under lock and key would one day be matched by a similar rage in my children: the rage of Black survival within the daily trivializations of white racism. I had to discover ways to own and use that rage . . . so that we did not wind up torturing ourselves by turning our rage against each other. It was not restraint I had to learn, but ways to use my rage to fuel actions, actions that could alter the very circumstances of oppression feeding my rage. (43)

It is here that Lorde also notes, as quoted earlier, that her father "died of inchoate rage at fifty-one," while her mother "would beat me until she wept from weariness. But it was not me, the

overly rambunctious child, who sold her rotting food and spat upon her and her children in the street" (45). At the same time, Lorde affirms that "[o]ur parents are examples of survival as a living pursuit, and no matter how different from them we may now find ourselves, we have built their example into our definitions of self—which is why we can be here, naming ourselves" (41-42). Lorde thus draws out a concept of black survival inherited from one's parents and yet directed differently in order to mitigate oppression within the family. While Lorde writes specifically about the (lesbian, interracial) family, and Meridian makes a symbolic promise to care for someone else's son, both visions of personal survival and community care require looking outside the family. Lorde is more optimistic than Walker's novel about the family as a space of healing, but she insists that healing requires attention to political struggles around the world, or else black people risk turning their rage upon members of their own families.[26] Perhaps Walker had in mind Frances Beale's distinction between dying and living for the revolution when she wrote *Meridian*: "We must begin to understand that a revolution entails not only the willingness to lay our lives on the firing line and get killed. In some ways, this is an easy commitment to make. To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns" (Beale 121). Beale also criticizes a tendency within the black liberation movement to romanticize traditional gender roles, claiming that an overemphasis on motherhood "completely negates the contributions that Black women have historically made to our struggle for liberation" (113). Living for the revolution, then, is a process of ongoing criticism of what is supposedly most "natural": women's roles in the family, intimate relationships, and the family itself.

[26] Lorde urges "Gays and Lesbians of Color" to think about "apartheid South Africa," "race-war . . . in a small Idaho town, Coeur D'Alene," "the lynching of two Black people in California," and "Chemically Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome," which affects electronics manufacturing workers "in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Mexico" ("Turning the Beat" 40-41).

Refusing Shame

In the 1970s, Meridian and Truman (who now live together platonically) register black voters in rural Georgia. Meridian merges this voter registration with a kind of community care. In order to persuade people, many of whom view electoral politics as irrelevant, to register, she helps them, bringing food, harvesting crops, and making demands on behalf the community. As one man says, "What good is the vote, if we don't own nothing?" (225). In an extreme case, after the city has failed to fill in a ditch that fills with rainwater and reservoir run-off, drowning children every year, Meridian carries the "bloated," "grotesque" body of a drowned boy to the mayor's office (209). This is a distinctly post-Civil Rights form of death: black children play in the ditch in hot weather because the public pool was closed by city officials who could no longer legally maintain segregated facilities "and who had, moreover, their own private swimming pools" (208). Yet Meridian continues to insist that voting can be liberatory for the poor blacks among whom she lives. When "the people" claim, "People will laugh at us because [voting] is not radical," the narrative faults them for "choosing to believe that radicalism would grow over their souls like a bright armor, overnight" (209).

Indeed, Meridian's post-Movement work exemplifies might be called a slow radicalism. The progress she makes in this work is tied up with her own embodied transformation, in two senses: the healing of her physical illness and the transformation of her relationship to reproduction. Meridian's final act of community organizing is to visit a teenage girl who is in prison for killing her baby. Before strangling her child, the thirteen-year-old girl had bitten a piece of flesh out of its cheek, which the narrative compares to an apple: "not red, alas, before she bit. And wasn't it right to seek to devour a perishable?" (234). The description of the woman's baby as a "perishable" recalls the city's devaluation of black lives in its failure to

prevent children from drowning; its cheek is "not red" (or pink, or other tones called "white"). We might read the infanticide as a twisted recognition, on the mother's part, of her own and her baby's disposability. Furthermore, Meridian reflects on the callousness of the young mother's family: she finds them "oddly smug about this child who killed her child," and the girl's mother's condemnation of her daughter recalls Mrs. Hill's response to Meridian's teenage pregnancy: "*too* damn grown, since before she was even ten. Doomed, I told her. Get out of my house. Walk the streets for all I care" (234).

What to make of this motif of infanticides: Fast Mary's, Meridian's contemplated murder of her baby, and finally this gruesome one that ends in incarceration? Each case is characterized by shame, either the shame of violating female sexual mores, or, in Meridian's case, the shame of giving up her child in the wake of slavery.[27] This shame presumably compounds the young women's unwillingness to be mothers. But the shame is also administered (if not originally produced) by the nuclear family: Meridian's mother and the imprisoned girl's mother and sister. In the aftermath of this incident, which doubly problematizes biological motherhood, the narrative outlines a form of care that is *other* than the family.

This encounter devastates Meridian, who "takes to her sleeping bag" (she does not own a bed) and tries "to rouse her own heart to compassion for her son. But her heart refuses to beat faster, to warm, except for the girl, the child who killed her child" (235). Truman, lying with Meridian, feels "*Shame*. But for what? For whom? What had he done?" There is a generative movement of shame in this scene: instead of feeling compassion for the son she gave up, which in the past has led Meridian to guilt and shame, Meridian feels for this other unwilling mother. Perhaps Truman begins to register some of the shame from which, as a man, he is protected: the

[27] Interestingly, Meridian is not particularly shamed by the pregnancy itself (not having understood premarital sex to be prohibited).

shame of unwanted pregnancy, of refusing motherhood, or of accepting it but falling short in the eyes of the world (by taking out one's rage on one's children, as in Lorde's example). Perhaps he is touched, years after the fact, by Meridian's rage as she was propositioned by the doctor who performed the abortion of the pregnancy he never knew about. That some of the work of care (and its associated baggage of shame) is being transferred to Truman, who until late in the novel is careless in his treatment of women, is reinforced by the fact that around this time, Truman begins to feel "intensely maternal" toward Meridian (236).

Meridian writes two poems after the prison visit which articulate a form of social care, against the privatized shame of women in the nuclear family. The first begins:

i want to put an end to guilt

i want to put and [sic] *end to shame*

whatever you have done my sister

(my brother)

know I wish to forgive you

love you (235)

The second poem reads:

there is water in the world for us

brought by our friends

though the rock of mother and god

vanishes into sand

and we, cast out alone

to heal

and re-create

ourselves. (236)

Read together, these poems suggest that black women might care for the community not (only) by becoming mothers in the literal sense, but by refusing a culture of reproduction that hands women shame, rage, or both. In the second poem, nourishment comes not from "mother" or "god," which have disappeared, but from "friends." This is not to say that *Meridian* is "against" biological reproduction; rather, the novel insistently reveals the costs to women (and children) of patriarchal motherhood. Against the racist claim that black men have abandoned their families, the novel claims that *the "ideal" family itself* has abandoned black women.

Walker suggests that the way to honor black women, including one's foremothers, is to refuse the "privilege of maternity," which is structured by guilt and shame. After writing these poems and being cared for by the "maternal" Truman, Meridian heals from her illness and bids Truman farewell, walking out of the novel itself. After she leaves, Truman "catches" her illness, becoming dizzy and falling to the floor (241-42). Meridian's passage from illness to health dramatizes what Walker writes about in her 1972 essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Starting with a reading of a short story by Jean Toomer, Walker discusses the tendency to depict black women as "crazy Saints" whose "bodies became shrines" (401). Walker asserts, "these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists, driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release," and lists a series of fates for these foremothers, including childbearing in addition to slavery and paid domestic work: "was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)—eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children—when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay?" (403). While Walker may seem to

address the particular problem of reproduction under slavery, later in the essay she returns to the topic in the present: "When we have asked for love, we have been given children" (405).

Ending with a scene of artistic production that heals Meridian's illness and allows her to pass on this work of care to Truman, *Meridian* asks how black women's art-making might tell one's "mother's stories," as Walker puts it in "Our Mothers' Gardens," without reproducing the structure of motherhood itself. How might black women define love outside of love for one's partner or child? And, to refer back to Meridian's final poem, how does one "re-create" oneself, "alone," in a way that is deeply communal?

Sophie Lewis describes learning how to read black feminist statements about self-creation, self-care, and autonomy as a "white European social reproduction feminist," noting that her first impression of Audre Lorde's famous statement, "We can learn to mother ourselves," was "I'm sorry to say, a concern that it sounded individualistic" (152). Lewis points out that Reproductive Justice feminists may practice "the strategic assertion of 'property in the body'" *not* in order to "appropriate for black women the property rights white women enjoy in relation to *their* children" but rather en route to "an unnatural, radical 'mamahood.'" Crucially, Lewis concludes that family-abolitionist black feminism's "vision of property is at root a commoning one" (153). In a similar way, Meridian's healing requires that she reappropriate her body from a structure of reproduction located in the nuclear family and enforced by shame. It is significant that the novel ends with her walking away from Truman alone, "strong enough to go" and "return[ing] to the world cleansed of sickness" (241). We could say that Meridian possesses herself for the first time, and this self-possession allows her to care for the community. As Toni Cade Bambara writes in 1969, "Revolution begins with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the

heart" ("On the Issue" 133). Bambara claims, furthermore, that this self-(un)fashioning has the potential to undo institutions like the family. She cites Frantz Fanon's discussion of the family in the Algerian revolution, remarking that "[t]he 'family' was no longer a socially-ordained nuclear unit to perpetuate the species or legitimize sexuality, but an extended kinship of cellmates and neighbors linked in the business of actualizing a vision of a liberated society" ("On the Issue" 133).

Significantly, Bambara also writes against Black Nationalism's pronatalism, and indeed, many of the essays in the 1970 anthology edited by Bambara, *The Black Woman*, grapple with sexism in the black liberation movement. Bambara criticizes the relegation of women to secretarial and service roles in the movement, and in another essay in the volume, she takes on the notion that in order to support the revolution, black women should reject contraception and have babies ("The Pill"). Bambara characterizes "the family" as an instance of "the destructive and corruptive white presence" in black culture: "the nuclear family cut [the woman] off from the larger society and turned this homebody into a nobody" (127). While Bambara would undoubtedly agree that domestic life has been profoundly different for black and white women, she resists valorizing the home as a space of healing. And while Bambara would surely find much to criticize in white feminist writing of the late 1960s, she does not therefore cede radical feminist issues to white feminists. Rather, she claims the politics of heterosexuality and reproduction as urgent sites of critique for black women.

The Politics of Healing in *The Salt Eaters*

Bambara's 1980 novel, *The Salt Eaters*, imagines healing made public; this healing, integral to the movement for racial justice, is firmly located *outside* the home. The novel seeks a

form of self-care that is not structured by the nuclear family or "private" space. It thus fleshes out the meaning of Bambara's claim, cited above, that "[r]evolution begins with the self" and poses the difficult question: how does one care for oneself without retreating to the self?

The novel insists, first, that black people must develop their own system of healing that rejects mind-body dualism and that emerges from black experience. The novel is set in Claybourne, Georgia in the late 1970s and reflects on the physical-psychic toll of the continued struggle for racial justice. At the center of the novel is the extended healing of Velma Henry, a movement activist who has recently attempted suicide. It is significant that Velma's healing is neither psychological nor physical, but rather both. For the length of the healing (which runs the course of the novel, with digressions to various storylines from the past and present), Minnie Ransom never takes her hands from Velma's body, and the novel suggests that justice can only emerge from careful attention to the body, mind, and spirit.

The novel considers the relationship between spirituality and black politics, citing spiritual traditions ranging from Christianity to Afro-Caribbean to New Age. At a gathering of women of color activists, one woman complains that her "ole comrade at the barricades" is now "sitting on a mat with a shaved head, nibbling on a communion wafer and sipping distilled water through a glass straw, Tibetan wind-chime music on the box, no Coltrane in sight . . . And meanwhile Bakke and Carter and the KKK and the Nazis and COINTELPRO not skipping a beat" (65). Even as the novel pokes fun at American appropriations of Eastern spirituality and considers the difficulty of doing spirituality and politics together, it affirms spiritual practices. Minnie Ransom's formidable healing practice includes discerning and sending energies to specific locations in the body, taking instructions from her spirit guide, and picking up "waves

from the Source" (54). The book's dedication, furthermore, sets a cosmic tone while zeroing in on feminized labor:

> Dear Khufu—
>
> The manuscript, assembled finally in the second and third years of the Last Quarter and edited under Leo's double moons, was initially typed by Loretta Hardge and is dedicated to my first friend, teacher, map maker, landscape aide
>
> Mama
>
> Helen Brent Henderson Cade Brehon
>
> who in 1949, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me.
>
> Bless the workers and beam on me if you please.

Bambara affirms "daydreaming" and the spiritual direction of astrology at the same time as she honors "workers," including the woman who typed her manuscript and her mother, who let her daughter continue to daydream as she cleaned the house. The novel is concerned with holding materialist analysis and struggle side by side with a cornucopia of healing practices; healing and politics are necessary to each other, though they also come into tension at times. *The Salt Eaters* maintains that social practices of healing make self-care revolutionary.

In a conversation about Velma's activist burnout, two other activists lay out a distinction between retreating to the self and caring for the self. While the former works against radical politics, the latter makes politics possible. Ruby and Jan, Claybourne activists who, like Velma, are trying to figure out how to marshal the movement's energies in the late 1970s, consider what it might mean for Velma to be "self-centered" (240). Ruby, skeptical of the term, asks, "You mean that Obie and the kid is the sun the dear sister revolves around or what-have-you?" but Jan

insists that Velma and her husband, Obie, never "set things up so they could opt for a purely personal solution," to which Ruby responds, "Quotes around 'personal,' if you please" (240). Jan explains that

> Velma has worked hard not to hollow out a safe corner—yeh, quotes around the safe—of home, family, marriage and then be less responsive, less engaged. Dodgy business trying to maintain the right balance there, the personal and the public, the club/heart cluster versus spades/diamonds, and a sun *and* Venus in Aquarius . . . Ahh, I knew I'd get a rise out of you, Ruby. But it's good she has put herself at center at last. If that's what you meant by "self-centered." (240-241)

At the same time that Ruby and Jan acknowledge the radical feminist maxim, "the personal is political," Jan claims that caring for oneself is necessary for the movement to continue. That is, to continue the political work that fights individuation, a black woman in the 1970s might have to practice some strategic self-possession. Jan's invocation of astrology is perhaps meant to annoy Ruby, but the novel is playfully serious about the importance of drawing from an eclectic range of spiritual resources in order to fight the material forces that oppose the revolution. As another activist, Inez, says when her friend reacts with disbelief to her interest in astrology—"You, the staunch Marxist-Maoist-dialectical-historical-materialist . . . want to know Palma's sign?"—"the material without the spiritual and psychic does not a dialectic make" (64).

The novel demonstrates that a struggle against the anti-black, anti-woman language of individual responsibility (which would become even more weaponized in the decade after Bambara's and Walker's novels were published) must also be a struggle against the valorization of the nuclear family. If, as Melinda Cooper argues, neoliberal individualism assumes a family, the work of liberation must extend care beyond the family. What Jan points out, then, is an

inverse of the neoliberal imperative to manage oneself (through the disavowed, privatized labor of care): Jan says that by caring for herself, Velma is able to care for those around her. Those she cares for are the black community, not (only) her immediate family. This passage thus suggests that care strategically directed toward the self may pave the way for extrafamilial care. The novel thereby opposes false distinctions that feed oppression: it insists that mind, body, and spirit are inseparable at the same time that it resists the separation of "family" from "community."

Another passage in *The Salt Eaters* suggest that liberatory world-making must be oriented around the community rather than the family. Frustrated by a patient's focus on her marital problems, Minnie expresses concern about the next generation's lack of direction in the face of cataclysmic change:

> Don't they know we on the rise? That our time is now? Here we are in the last quarter and how we gonna pull it all together and claim the new age in our name? How we gonna rescue this planet from them radioactive mutants? . . . we gonna have to get a mighty large group trained to pull us through the times ahead. Them four horses galloping already, the seven trumpets blasting. (46)

As in the novel's dedication, the text refers to its present, the late 1970s, as "the last quarter," drawing attention to the coming millennium and striking an explicitly apocalyptic tone in the reference to "four horses" and "seven trumpets." The kind of training called for in this passage resonates with the concept of "survival" in Lorde's essays and *Meridian*: a finely-tuned balance of anger and letting go that allows for self-preservation while being always focused on the community. Both *The Salt Eaters* and *Meridian* suggest that after the Civil Rights movement, revolution requires forging a new self that is healed by its work with the community.

The patient with marital problems also inspires Minnie Ransom to make the enigmatic claim, "Sometime original mother is too much the mother" (45). In the context of the forward-looking discussion of "claim[ing] the new age" as the millennium approaches, I read this line as calling for a new kind of politics that emerges from black women's experiences of care while rejecting the structure of motherhood as it is reproduced in America, at the cost of women. This line especially resonates with Bambara's claim that there may be "no models" for black women, "that we shall have to create from scratch" ("On the Issue" 133). Like *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters* suggests that attention to embodiment might yield a vision of social care. Both novels are concerned with resignifying the reproductive body, not as the site of compulsory reproduction and patriarchal motherhood, but rather as generative of a new vision of care. For example, Velma reflects on learning from Sophie Heywood, one of the community's spiritual teachers, "about the master brain being in the uterus, where all ideas sprung from and were nurtured and released to the lesser brain in the head" (271). From the uterus as a site of pathology, a cause of "hysteria" in 19th-century Euro-American culture, to Freud's sense of the uterus as a means of compensation, through reproduction, for the lack of a penis, Bambara claims the uterus as the generator, not necessarily of children, but of imagination. The novel frequently figures the crisis of the movement as an embodied crisis; Velma reflects on the movement's fragmentation: "Thought the workers of the sixties had pulled the Family safely out of range of the serpent's fangs so the workers of the seventies could drain the poisons, repair damaged tissues, retrain the heartworks, realign the spine. … But amnesia had set in anyhow. Heart/brain/gut muscles atrophied anyhow" (258). *The Salt Eaters* suggests that attention to the body, and specifically sexual difference, might revive the movement. From an understanding of "women" as the source of care in the

family and the uterus as the site of reproduction and/or illness, the novel resignifies women as the source of new ideas for social configurations of care.

Political Mothers and Intuitive Witches

As Jelani Cobb suggests, the movement for Black Lives represents both a continuation of and break from the movement of the 1960s. In drawing greater attention to the experiences of women and queer and trans people of color, the contemporary movement draws attention to care. In an essay about the politics of healing in Black Lives Matter, Deva Woodly begins with two anecdotes of black maternal mortality, concluding that even controlling for education and socioeconomic level, postpartum death is much more common among black than white women. She cites a medical researcher's theory of "weathering," whereby "chronic stress brought on by racism and sexism . . . changes the biology of black women" (220). These anecdotes demonstrate that it makes no sense to distinguish between the family and the community. Woodly quotes the activist Erica Garner, the daughter of Eric Garner, who says of another activist, "Look at Kalief Browder's mother, she died of a broken heart. She had heart problems because she kept fighting for her son" (219).[28] While Kalief Browder's mother was fighting for her son, she was also fighting for the communities of which he was a part: black men, incarcerated people, people placed in solitary confinement. With mainstream medicine barely beginning to accept the notion that the body responds to feelings, even to the point of death, *The Salt Eaters*' concept of mind, body, and politics as inextricable is valuable to return to. Woodly notes that Black Lives Matter "provides a unique opportunity for participants to heal themselves in and through the political

[28] Eric Garner was strangled by a police officer in New York in 2014. Kalief Browder was imprisoned for three years, without trial, at Rikers Island in New York after an alleged theft. He was in solitary confinement for two of those years, and he committed suicide two years after his release, in 2015.

work of securing justice for the most marginalized" and makes "official institutional space . . . for healing practitioners of various kinds—from licensed therapists to masseuses, chiropractors, and intuitive witches" (233).

As *The Salt Eaters* reminds us, this is not self-care as retreat from conflict, but rather fierce self-care that is not always easy and that demands constant recalibration. In Bambara's novel, the "intuitive witches" themselves are not always in agreement: Minnie Ransom and her spirit guide, Old Wife, often bicker, including about whether they are witches. For example, Minnie calls Old Wife a "haint," Old Wife objects that she is a Christian, and Minnie complains that Old Wife's opposition to witches is narrow-minded: "Seems to me you need to slough off a lot more of the nonsense from this plane if you're going to be any help to me. Some spirit guide" (43). Of course, Old Wife's name also suggests an attachment to outmoded (and yet persistent) ways of thinking about women's identity. If we read Minnie Ransom and her spirit guide as coexisting models of femininity—the public healer and the wife—it becomes clear that the first is not opposed to, but rather is born from, the second. In this way, we can also think of Old Wife as midwifing the healer-witch that Minnie Ransom becomes.

If Old Wife is a mother-figure to Minnie Ransom, she is not one to be uncritically worshipped, even as she guides Minnie. As the activist, Jan, says of the Academy, the center of Claybourne's black activism, now divided on political and spiritual questions: "don't confuse the vehicle with the objective; all cocoons are temporary and disappear" (199). The cocoon (an image of freedom through dependency in Sheila Heti's and Rachel Cusk's writing, as I discuss in the next chapter) resonates in Bambara's novel as a figure for the impermanence of political "homes." While an organization or institution may be a home for a particular group at a particular time, it will change or fall away eventually. Survival requires the kind of social care

demonstrated by Velma's triumphant recovery at the end of the novel as she, "rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool a burst cocoon" (295). Self-care, for Velma, means putting herself in someone else's hands for a while—not someone in her family, but a healer at a community health center, where people come and go, watching the healing progress. I suggest we read this "burst cocoon" as a deconstruction of the family as *the* site of care.

Chapter 3

Attention, Reality, and the Question of Reproduction

In this chapter, I consider how two contemporary novelists generate a non-sovereign feminist freedom through the question of reproduction. The British writer Rachel Cusk's trilogy of novels, *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016), and *Kudos* (2018), and her 2001 memoir, *A Life's Work*, demonstrate that "male values" are not compatible with motherhood and call for women to develop their own form of freedom. Cusk's writing, explicitly concerned with questions of "reality," poses this feminist freedom as an artistic problem. Her writing "challenges the monopoly of the established reality to determine what is 'real' . . . by creating a fictitious world which is nevertheless 'more real than reality itself,'" as Marcuse describes revolutionary art (*Aesthetic* 22). I read these texts with Canadian novelist Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), which works toward freedom by problematizing choice. Like Cusk's work, Heti's novel pays attention to dynamic embodiment, and it employs formal structures that emphasize openness and chance. Though many critics claimed that the novel was "about" the decision not to have a child, I argue that the novel deconstructs the notion of choice in order to develop a more robust feminist freedom. As in Cusk's work, Heti's writing demonstrates that the construction of a feminist imaginary happens through attention to experiences of non-sovereignty.

I consider how both writers emphasize possibility and openness instead of choice in constructing a feminist imaginary like the one called for by Luce Irigaray. Cusk's writing and Heti's novel take seriously Irigaray's claim that not only must mothers be perceived *as women* (particularly by their daughters) in order to redefine motherhood from a feminist perspective, but women without children must understand

> that we are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, political, religious, for example. But this creation has been forbidden us for centuries, and we must reappropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women. ("Bodily Encounter" 43)

Irigaray insists that the patriarchal displacement of the "generative power" of mothers onto God and other figures of masculine power prevents all women, not only those with children, from knowing their desires and power ("Bodily Encounter" 41). Sexual difference, as it is *socially* rather than anatomically inscribed, creates an opportunity for and indeed an imperative that women learn to speak as women. As long as motherhood is defined by patriarchy, mothers and non-mothers suffer. Cusk's writing demonstrates that the kind of freedom offered to women by a society that says that women are already free is hollow because it ignores care work. As a result, she suggests, the subjectivity offered to women is also hollow and must be remade by women, via the question of reproduction. Along similar lines, Heti's novel demonstrates that the so-called freedom to choose whether to have children is not liberating because the choice itself is structured by patriarchy. The "choice" that *Motherhood*'s narrator faces offers no good outcome: motherhood would lead to a loss of time, independence, and solitude, while not-motherhood may lead to regrets, disapprobation, and a feeling of a missed opportunity.[29] Like Irigaray, Cusk and

[29] As Orna Donath argues, the notion that women inevitably regret not having children "uses regret as a weapon to threaten women who do not want to be mothers" and "simply excludes any possibility that women might also regret becoming mothers, that they might wish to return to being nobody's mom" (xiii). Donath shows that regretting motherhood is so taboo as to be almost unspeakable and argues that there is no way of knowing how common this phenomenon is as long as it is viewed as a sign of pathology. Donath also persuasively separates the question of maternal love from regret, showing, through women's testimonies, that a woman can love her children while regretting having them (75, 110). While this regret is not a direct focus of this chapter, the near-total silencing of women who regret becoming mothers is a powerful component of the question of reproduction that I describe. I wonder, for example, how Heti's narrator might have experienced her "choice" in a culture in which maternal regret was more openly expressed.

Heti insist that all women, whether or not they have children (or indeed whether or not they are biologically able to) are constructed by motherhood, and therefore that the feminist imaginary that women still lack must come from the question of motherhood. Such an imaginary requires new forms of attention, which both writers enact formally in their novels: Cusk, through a narrative style that I call "evacuated realism," and Heti, through an interest in indeterminacy. Heti and Cusk also reflect on the relationship between attention, women's writing, and care. These texts demonstrate the insufficiency of models of subjectivity oriented around choice and self-possession; as a result, motherhood demands that we think differently about everyone's subjectivity, everyone's freedom.

Narrating Reality? The *Outline* Trilogy

Reviewing Rebecca Asher's book, *Shattered: Modern Motherhood and the Illusion of Equality*, Cusk considers the shock that motherhood inflicts on a privileged, successful woman (like Asher, and, judging from Cusk's memoir, *A Life's Work*, Cusk herself):

> Having been told all her life to value her individuality and pursue its aims, she encounters an outright contradiction, a betrayal–even among the very gatekeepers of her identity, her husband or colleagues or friends–in the requirement that she surrender it . . . like many intelligent women of her age, no one ever told her that she wasn't equal: it was from outside that the impression came, from the attainments she was free to pursue, the liberties that were available to her, the achievements and jobs she was able to acquire. . . . So while the old idea of woman had certainly been done away with, no one had thought to put anything in its place. ("Shattered")

What might women learn from this experience of "surrender[ing]" their "individuality" in caring for a child—in finding, despite decades of feminist gains, that they are still the ones expected to do this? First, they learn that the "equality" promised to them is not real. Then, Cusk suggests, since this equality is false, perhaps the subjectivity offered to them by the society that claims gender equality is also empty: "no one had thought to put anything in its place." Simply put, it is up to women to define women's subjectivity:

> The lesson here is not about motherhood so much perhaps as about womanhood, womanhood not as something granted–and removed, should the necessity arise–by the cultural conditions, but as something personally realised. If women experience equality only from the outside, in the form of their freedom to pursue male values, the intransigence of biological identity comes as a surprise. It is as women, not as mothers, that we should *watch more closely, listen harder, think more deeply*. ("Shattered," italics mine)

The experience of motherhood—and the fact that it is shocking and even appalling to many contemporary women—points women to the necessity of constructing a feminist imaginary. In the passage quoted earlier, Irigaray is clear that this redefinition of women's subjectivity happens through imaginative work. Ironically, though women have been constructed primarily as mothers, they have been estranged from the "maternal dimension" of world-making work like "language, art, the social, political, religious." Doing this work from the position of the "mother" might yield a feminist imaginary: that is, subjectivity not "granted" but rather "personally realised." I include in this category of "mother" all women, even those who refuse motherhood, because (as Heti's novel especially shows) society constructs all women, even those who cannot reproduce, as potential mothers. I read Cusk's use of "personally" above as distinct from, and

opposed to, the "personal" of liberal feminism, offering the "personal" freedom to work outside the home while raising a child (which Cusk's review shows to be misguided), or even the "personal" freedom to opt out of motherhood altogether. Cusk's "womanhood" is "personally realised" through the cultivation of a new kind of attention, and this is the project in which her writing is engaged.

Cusk's novels, narrated by a mother-writer, enact what I call "evacuated realism," in which the narrative relates dialogue and visual descriptions, but almost no commentary.[30] As far as we know anything at all about what the narrator, Faye, thinks or feels, we hear it through her own spoken dialogue, in the company, as it were, of the novels' other characters, and thus the perceived directness, honesty, or intimacy of first-person narration is absent. The novels consist mostly of Faye hearing other people's stories, and the withholding of her feelings or judgments makes it impossible for the reader to know whether the narrator is interested in these stories; whether she hears them willingly, as it were.

Responding to a question about the excision of the narrator's subjectivity in *Kudos*, Cusk says that she intended the novel "to be the exact degree to which the world can be personally affirmed by a human being, and that any human being can affirm the material in this book, if they were present" (Elliott Bay). Significantly, Cusk claims that her work does not achieve this, that "it was completely impossible to truly represent a reality that is seen by any human," but her preoccupation with words like "truly" and "reality" is interesting; why give fiction the task of representing "reality" (whatever that might mean) at all? While the concern itself may strike readers as old-fashioned, oddly courting scientific positivism or evincing a Modernist fixation with representing "the real," I argue that this is a speculative feminist project, and therefore

[30] Cusk herself has referred to the style of the trilogy as "annihilated perspective" (Kellaway).

radical. Articulating her opposition to the narration of interiority, Cusk claims that the kind of thinking and remembering that the realist novel gives us is unrealistic, and that rather than such thoughts, a person's subjectivity is composed of "a much more surface-based positioning of antennae, or trying to find your true position in relation to somebody else's true position" (Elliott Bay). Subjectivity as a "surface-based positioning of antennae" suggests a concern with the senses, direct observation, and attention rather than the rumination or memories central to the kind of novels to which Cusk objects. This metaphor of surfaces and touch resonates with Cusk's descriptions of her own habits of observation in her memoir, *Aftermath*. Recalling that a childhood split between the United States and Britain made her "an onlooker," she writes that after her divorce she is again "an observer": "To observe is not to not feel—in fact it is to put yourself at the mercy of feeling, like the child's warm skin meeting the cold air of midnight" (62). Observation is a kind of exposure that makes one vulnerable, and Cusk represents this exposure in metaphors of the body, suggesting that attention to the body is a crucial part of the mode of observation/narration that Cusk develops.

As Cusk states above, the freedom offered to women is male freedom, emphasizing "male values" like sovereignty, incompatible with the experience of being a woman (as is especially clear in motherhood). When considered alongside Cusk's criticism of how the realist novel represents reality, might this imply that the reality of much of literature is male? How might feminist literature apprehend reality differently? The project of Cusk's writing is to describe non-sovereign freedom, a freedom that might be experienced by women. Though this articulation comes from the experience of motherhood in Cusk's memoirs and novels, it is a freedom for all women, who are constructed as possible mothers, expected to do the work of

care, etc. As Cusk insists above, "It is as women, not as mothers, that we should watch more closely, listen harder, think more deeply."

I suggest that we understand the pared-down observation of Cusk's *Outline* trilogy along these lines, as a kind of observation that puts one "at the mercy of feeling." The narrator does not need to express her feelings for this to be true; in fact, by omitting these feelings much of the time, the exposure of warm skin to midnight air, to return to Cusk's metaphor above, is starker. The reader is exposed to what happens between people with the least possible interference from the narrator. This is an illusion, of course; Cusk's narrator still chooses what to describe and how. But with less of the narrator's interiority, the subject being exposed, "at the mercy of feeling," may be the reader. If the books are successful, this exposure—a refigured contact with the world—generates new feelings in the reader and a new way of apprehending reality, one that accounts for experiences of non-sovereignty.

Standpoint Theory

In this way, the novels help us reconsider the relationship of past feminist interventions to the category of "women." For example, Sara Ruddick's 1980 article, "Maternal Thinking" (and later book of the same title) consider the "lethal conjunction" of "power and powerlessness" in the experience of mothering: "Children confront and rely upon a powerful maternal presence only to watch her become the powerless woman in front of the father, the teacher, the doctor, the judge, the landlord—the world" (343). Ruddick claims that "there are female traditions and practices out of which a distinctive kind of thinking has developed," which she calls "maternal thinking." While Ruddick acknowledges that maternal thinking is not limited to mothers or even to women, she theorizes it from the site of motherhood. Ranjana Khanna points out that

Ruddick's book yokes together, uneasily, a "practicalist conception of truth" with a politics of resistance that, while open to all people who think maternally, nonetheless proceeds from the standpoint of the mother (302-04).

In other words, there is a tension in Ruddick's argument between the affirmation of a particular standpoint and the belief in a "real" world shared by all people. I am interested in how Rachel Cusk's novels work with this very tension. In other words, how do Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking" and Cusk's novels at once insist that knowledge is socially situated *and* seek to describe the world "as it really is"? Cusk's interest in representing reality comes from the conviction that reality as it has been represented does not account for the experiences of non-sovereignty central to motherhood (and womanhood). Quoting Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, Ruddick traces and develops a relationship between attention and love that, significantly, frames these qualities in unsentimental, even rationalist, terms:

> Attention and love are fundamental to the construction of "objective reality" understood "in relation to the progressing life of a person," a "reality which is revealed to the patient eye of love." Attention is an *intellectual* capacity connected even by definition with love, a special kind of "knowledge of the individual." "The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love."[31] (358)

Ruddick claims, furthermore, that "the enemy of attention is what [Murdoch and Weil] call 'fantasy,' defined not as rich imaginative play" but rather as an "intellectual and imaginative activity in the service of consolation, domination, anxiety, and aggrandizement" (Murdoch 358). Ruddick's claim that good mothering comes from a rational, even (following Weil)

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[31] The first and second sentences of this passage quote Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good* (Schocken, 1971), 40, 28. The third sentence quotes Simone Weil, "Human Personality," in *Collected Essays*, edited and translated by Richard Rees (Oxford University Press, 1962).

"disinterested" form of attention, and that this maternal thinking should be the model for human thinking in general, resonates with the ethical project of Cusk's narrative style. Setting itself against a kind of realist fiction which in representing human interiority engages in fantasy, Cusk's style encourages description without emotional projection.

Echoing Ruddick's and Cusk's interest in "objective reality," Donna Haraway's theorization of standpoint in "Situated Knowledges" asks

> how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects . . . *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (187)

As Heather Love points out, Haraway's critique of the Western, masculinist, scientistic "view from nowhere" has been remembered well, but her wariness of relativism and appreciation for responsible, world-building scientific practices has been largely forgotten ("Temptations" 53). In "Situated Knowledges," Haraway writes against relativism, which she calls "the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity," and calls for "a doctrine or practice of objectivity" premised on partial knowledge (191). This attention to embodied, particular knowledge leads Haraway, furthermore, to a speculative vision of a future "less organized by axes of domination" characterized by a viewpoint in which "the unmarked category would *really* disappear." Finally, Ruddick

> look[s] forward to the day when men are willing and able to share equally and actively in transformed maternal practices. When that day comes, will we still identify some thought as maternal rather than merely parental? Might we echo the cry of some feminists—there

> shall be no more "women"—with our own—there shall be no more "mothers," only people engaging in childcare. To keep matters clear I would put the point differently. On that day, there will be no more "Fathers," no more people of either sex who have power over their children's lives and moral authority in their children's world, though they do not do the work of attentive love. (361-62)

My point is that standpoint theory does not necessarily have as its end the preservation of identity-based knowledge, but rather looks forward to the dissolution of systems of domination that maintain identity categories. Similarly, by dramatizing and literalizing "the work of attentive love" as description that refuses to imagine anyone's thoughts or feelings, Cusk's novels seek a responsible account of the world as it really is (impossible though that account may be) and, moreover, insist that this kind of description, though it often originates with mothers, must be the work of all people. Cusk's work pays particular attention to experiences of non-sovereignty that might generate a kind of freedom. Her descriptions of family life and her attention to women's embodiment trace a notion of freedom *within* dependency and compulsion.

Freedom and the Family

One of the most striking characteristics of Cusk's trilogy is the sense of horror that suffuses many of the scenes of family life. The sense of imprisonment or claustrophobia that characterizes these scenes is rendered most extravagantly, perhaps, during a conversation with a man Faye meets on a plane from London to Athens, in *Outline*. The man describes the process of exhuming the remains of his relatives from their graves in order to place them in a newly-constructed family tomb that his mother had built in the last years of her life. His parents, whom he describes as engaging in a "lifelong argument" (77), request to be placed side by side in the

new tomb, but the man accidently places his mother's father, who had been "the cause . . . of many of his parents' arguments" (78) between his parents. Realizing this on the way to the airport, the man asks his taxi driver to return him to the cemetery and to help him rearrange the coffins. When the taxi driver abandons the man at the cemetery, the man unseals the tomb himself, jumps down into it, and rearranges the coffins, but he is unable to get out of the tomb. Telling this story to Faye, he says he cannot remember how he got out; the story ends, in a sense, with him still stuck in his family's grave.

Responding to this stark image of the family as hell, Cusk's narrator describes a shift in the relationship between her two sons around the time that her marriage was ending. As young boys, they are united by a belief in "make-believe, a narrative which seemed to run like a magic river through our household, inexhaustible, and which they could exit and re-enter at will" (80). Faye reflects that "it is one definition of love, the belief in something that only the two of you can see, and in this case it proved to be an impermanent basis for living" (81); one of the boys stops believing in the "imaginary worlds," and they begin arguing:

> they began to set greater store by facts, by what had been done and said, and to build the case for themselves and against one another. It was hard . . . not to see this transposition from love to factuality as the mirror of other things that were happening in our household at the time. What was striking was the sheer negative capability of their former intimacy: it was as though everything that had been inside was moved outside, piece by piece, like furniture being taken out of the house and put on the pavement. There seemed to be so much of it, because what had been invisible was now visible; what had been useful was now redundant. (81)

John Keats coined the phrase "negative capability" to describe a quality of great literature, defining it as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (1927). The power of Faye's sons' "magic river" comes from this capacity, Faye suggests, and their relationship deteriorates when their ability to dwell in uncertainty fails them, and they become interested, rather, in "facts." A world-building relationship becomes a relationship characterized by self-defense.

The original closeness of Faye's sons, grounded in a world of "make-believe," is described as "love," or "the belief in something that only the two of you can see." We might also call this art, which also relies on belief in a framework outside of, or other than, reality. Herbert Marcuse argues, against an "orthodo[x]" Marxist aesthetics (ix), that literature need not directly address politics to be radical. Revolutionary art works rather on the level of form,

> through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature. . . . The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality. (*Aesthetic* 8-9)

The rigid, programmatic Marxist aesthetics that Marcuse criticizes (exemplified by the plays of Bertolt Brecht, for example) fell out of favor long ago, but his argument is still relevant because it clarifies how art is political: not solely in its content (though form and content can never be separated), but in its form. Art shows us what is real, not by representing reality as it appears to us (as journalism does, for example), but by summoning "a reality which is suppressed and distorted the given reality" (*Aesthetic* 6). If revolutionary art acts on us in this way, and we act differently, then revolutionary art remakes reality. When the brothers' relationship begins to

demand a precise structure, it is no longer in the realm of artistic belief, but in a more hegemonic reality, the reality of personal individuation and legal sovereignty, as suggested by the juridical language of "to build the case for themselves and against one another."

The imaginative work of Faye's sons is similar to the work that Cusk's novels do. While Cusk's stated desire to write a novel that is "the exact degree to which the world can be personally affirmed by a human being" may sound like a commitment to the realm of facts and evidence into which the boys fall, we should understand her work as seeking the "true reality" that, according to Marcuse, contests the reality promoted and enforced by systems of power. In Cusk's work, this is the "reality" in which feminism has accomplished its aims; women and men are equal. As I will discuss later, the *Outline* trilogy's exploration of a mother's position in the heterosexual family shows this reality to be false. While the focus in the passage above is not on the politics of heterosexuality, the breakup of a family is described in terms that map onto Cusk's feminist artistic vision. The simile that links the brothers' new antagonism to the emptying-out of a house—"like furniture being taken out of the house and put on the pavement"—suggests that a happy family always contains the possibility of dissolution. I suggest that we read this scene in the context of Cusk's claim that the "freedom to pursue male values" fails women, especially mothers. This reality is the one subtending the family in this scene, the "processes of justice and the law" to which her sons appeal (82). These (male) processes, ignoring the reality of the mother's position (which is the reality of care), do not lead to resolution. The sons' "narrative" of "make-believe," in contrast, described as "inexhaustible," creates a world in which they can live. I am not suggesting that the make-believe world is *analogous* to the feminist imaginary created by Cusk's writing—the make-believe world ends when the boys reach a certain age, and perhaps

would have ended regardless of the nature of their parents' relationship—but there is a resonance between them that points to the insufficiency of existing ways of narrating the family.

The *Outline* trilogy suggests that a feminist imaginary would restructure the family, yielding a vision of freedom tied not to sovereignty but rather to interdependence and attention. Another man who sits next to the narrator on a plane (this time in *Kudos*, the third novel in the trilogy) describes both his work and family life as unhappy and contentious. In his job as "director of a global management company," he kept a spreadsheet on his computer titled "Freedom," which tracked his progress toward earning enough money to retire (8). He compares his working life, which involved a great deal of travel, to "a medieval method of punishment that involved incarcerating the prisoner in a space specially designed to prevent him from being able to fully extend his limbs in any direction," but when he does manage to retire at a relatively young age, he argues with his family, whose lifestyles strike him as lazy (9). Significantly, this man's story is linked to the Brexit campaign. The man tells Faye that the night before, he had sat up with his dying dog and then buried the dog in his yard; driving to the airport in the morning, distraught, he sees "these signs by the road with the same words on them . . . and I started to think they'd been put there for me" (11). The narrator refers to "the question of whether to leave or remain," and the man says, "it felt as if I'd been asking myself that question for as long as I could remember" (12). He may be referring to whether he should leave or stay in his family, or to the decision to retire. In either case, this passage asks what freedom might "really" be.

In addition to leaning heavily on racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia, many of the arguments for Brexit framed the United Kingdom's relationship to the EU as one of confinement or dependency: for example, that "the EU threatens British sovereignty" or that "the EU is strangling the UK in burdensome regulations" (Lee). While the global economic crisis of 2008 is

not an explicit topic of the novels, this crisis, and related flare-ups of nationalist-isolationist xenophobia, like Brexit, are distinctly if subtly in the background of the trilogy.[32] Furthermore, the British narrator's travels to Portugal and Greece call attention to the relationship between more and less prosperous European nations in the wake of this crisis. In contrast to the case of a nation that, by nature of its debt to wealthier nations, does in fact have its terms for living set by an international governing body (as in the Greek bailout of 2010), the pro-Brexit campaign capitalized on a contradictory sense that foreign entities both more and less powerful than the UK (the EU and, say, Portugal, not to mention immigrants and asylum-seekers) were parasitic on Britain. In setting the man's feeling of confinement and discord in his family next to the campaign for Britain to leave the EU, *Outline* complicates movements toward freedom. It suggests that freedom requires more than just the desire to be away from something that feels confining: it requires a vision of freedom itself. The trilogy ultimately sketches an alternative vision of freedom, not as the loosing of burdensome relationships but as the creative working *within* relations of dependency.

The Self as Outline

According to Cusk, the pain of her own divorce, which she writes about in her pre-trilogy memoir, *Aftermath* (2012), was multiplied by the memoir's reception. Writing in the UK's *Sunday Times*, Camilla Long called Cusk "a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish"; Cusk described the reception as "English

[32] For example, one of Faye's students in a writing course in Athens recalls walking through a part of the city where, the previous year, he had taken part in demonstrations—presumably the anti-austerity protests of 2010 or 2011 (*Outline* 146-47). Greek protesters rallied in response to their Parliament's passing of austerity measures as part of its bail-out by the European "Troika" (composed of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) after the economic crisis of 2008 (Ross 53).

cruelty and bullying" and Judith Thurman notes, in a profile of Cusk, that Cusk was "nearly annihilated" by this experience (Thurman). When an interviewer asks Cusk "[h]ow far . . . the invisible narrator" of *Outline* is "a reaction to *Aftermath*'s critical mugging," Cusk responds, "Without wishing to sound melodramatic, it was creative death after *Aftermath*. . . . I was heading into total silence" (Kellaway). Long's review is especially striking considering that *Aftermath* barely discusses Cusk's marriage but rather focuses on her feelings of alienation after her family has broken apart. With the exception of section narrated from the perspective of an au-pair, which depicts Cusk's ex-husband neutrally, he is nowhere in the book, except as an absent presence (perhaps this is what offends Long).

It is not clear whether "annihilated" is Cusk's word or Thurman's, but it is the same word that Cusk uses, in her interview with Kate Kellaway, to describe the narrative perspective she develops in the trilogy. Furthermore, though Kellaway does not note this, *Outline* ends with a story of an actual mugging, also following a divorce, which also leads to "creative death." Anne, a playwright with whom Faye shares an apartment while teaching in Athens, tells the narrator that ever since a violent mugging during which her attacker tried to strangle her, she has been unable to eat in moderation, with the result that she eats either in excess (an entire jar of honey, for example), or not at all. She has also been unable to write, because as she develops a play, a single word that "sums up" the play will come into her head, and she doesn't see the point of continuing. Rather than reading Anne solely in terms of trauma, I read her obsessive-compulsive thoughts and behavior and her ideas about artistic subjectivity as reconfiguring the terrain of "freedom."

Anne relates a conversation with a man sitting next to her on a plane, whose account of his life seems to describe everything she is not:

> This anti-description, for want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she now was. (240)

The man, a diplomat, later ends the conversation after she suggests that his failure to learn Greek is related to his being separated from his family. He replies that he is unable to learn Greek "because he did not consider Greek to be useful. . . . it would have been a waste . . . of his time" (244). Anne describes the ensuing silence as "almost a battle of wills, his discipline against my emotion" (245). Anne, whose feeling of being an outline, blank inside, gives her a *sense* of herself, suggests a model for subjectivity that does not require either a clearly elaborated interiority or self-control.

Significantly, sitting next to the man also leads her to reflect on her fluid embodiment; while "her neighbour . . . had probably always been the way he was right now . . . In her life as a woman, amorphousness—the changing of shapes—had been a physical reality" (240). Anne refers to her precipitous weight loss after "the incident," but also perhaps to puberty, and though Anne doesn't mention a child, "the changing of shapes" certainly evokes pregnancy as well. "Amorphousness," designating something lacking structure or form, also connotes fluidity and thus points to the association of women with fluids and flows, and with the cyclically-changing reproductive body. As Elizabeth Grosz notes about Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, "Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, is liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside. They affront a subject's aspiration toward autonomy and self-

identity" (*Volatile* 193-194). How might Anne's sense of herself as this man's opposite, as amorphous and changeable where he is structured and consistent, suggest a vision of the subject not premised on an impermeable "self-identity"? At first, Anne's relation to the man appears to reinforce the familiar sense of woman as negative or lack which Irigaray criticizes, as "outline" implies an empty interior. But I suggest that we read this scene as, first, an acknowledgement that women's subjectivity has not yet been defined and, secondly, an attempt to elaborate this subjectivity from the bodies and experiences of women. In a discussion of the male gendering of the "subject," Irigaray claims that the "subject"

> is father, mother, and children. And the relationships between them. He is masculine and feminine and the relationships between them. What mockery of generation, parody of copulation and genealogy, drawing its *strength* from the same model, from the mode of the same: the subject. In whose sight everything *outside* remains forever a condition making possible the image and the reproduction of the self. A faithful, polished mirror, empty of altering reflections. ("Any Theory" 121)

As Irigaray points out, a view of the self as contained and discrete (which the man espouses in his denial that his family's absence had anything to do with his inability to learn Greek) in fact *requires* (but disavows) the incorporation of the love and care generated in the family, especially by women. Anne defines herself against this masculinist notion of the subject: for her, subjectivity comes from experiences of compulsion and dependency, experiences that put one at the mercy of the world. Anne acknowledges, in other words, that women are still "faithful, polished mirror[s]" as long as they pursue male subjectivity. She recognizes that she is an "outline" and her story is an attempt to generate a feminist reality that might fill in this outline. While Anne describes this scene of sexual difference as "his discipline against my emotion," I

suggest that the feminist reality coming into being in the scene requires, in fact, a kind of discipline: the discipline of attention and description.

Therefore, while certainly linked to a traumatic event, Anne's compulsive eating and failure to produce artistic work can also be read as a generative challenge to male-defined subjectivity. I want to reiterate that these interactions are, in Anne's case, painful: her mugging threatened her sense of self-possession in the starkest terms, and her relationship to food does not seem pleasurable or empowering in the least. But the powerful story that concludes *Outline* demands that these painful and gendered experiences that threaten self-sovereignty be used to redefine subjectivity so that it does not require sovereignty at all. The narrative suggests, too, that Anne's writer's block be construed not as a loss of artistic power but rather as a transition to some new form of artistic subjectivity. The story she tells the narrator of her recent life—a divorce, the attack, the epiphany while listening to the man on the plane—suggests an artistic practice attuned to relation. While she had previously thought of a play as "a house" that she could "walk away from" (242), after the attack, drama "ceased to be theoretical, was no longer an internal structure in which she could hide and look out at the world" (246). Anne's sense of being an outline aligns her with Cusk's narrator, outlined by other people's stories, and perhaps the narrative encourages us to conclude that what is no longer possible for a subject for whom sovereignty has been exposed as a fantasy is the "internal structure" of the traditional realist narrator, who claims authority in proportion to his rich interiority.

This and other instances of compromised subjectivity, while negotiated in Cusk's novels through figures of women and mothers, is nonetheless the model the novels set forth for everyone. Though Cusk starts from the standpoint of the mother, the conditions of unfreedom and compromise that she describes may be experienced by anyone who seeks liberation. For

example, the wealthy man who retires early goes from the "prison" of his job to a tedious family life. Certainly, the novels do not level the distinctions between these oppressions, and as feminist texts, they are particularly attuned to women's unfreedom, but in their treatment of compulsion and dependency, they suggest a way of being that does not place freedom outside of constraint.

The Non-Sovereign Mother: From Problem to Opportunity

The compromised, embodied subjectivity that begins as a problem in Cusk's memoir, *A Life's Work*, comes into focus as a feminist opportunity in the *Outline* trilogy. *A Life's Work* describes a dilemma: believing that "male values" are possible for her, Cusk comes up against the impossibility of being both a mother and a citizen. Ruth Quiney notes of *A Life's Work* that Cusk is "torn between allegiance to the regulated public world and a reaction against it" (28), particularly when she is with her baby in public: "it is as if I myself have been returned to some primitive, shameful condition, being sick in expensive shops, crying on buses, while other people remain aloof and unpitying. . . . like so many mothers, I come to see something inhuman in civilisation, something vain and deathly" (*Life's* 136-37). Motherhood leads Cusk to question civilization itself, which judges the "unprocessed human need" (137) of a baby to be excessive and inappropriate and, at the same time, erases this dependency and care: Cusk notes that she and her baby are "clodhopping and clumsy and yet curiously invisible" (136). The conflict between civilization and care, or sovereignty and motherhood, that emerges in *A Life's Work*, particularly through images of embodiment, resolves in the *Outline* trilogy into a vision of embodied non-sovereign freedom.

Describing her pregnancy and the first year of her daughter's life, the memoir frequently describes the fetus or newborn as parasitic and considers Cusk's own body with anger or disgust.

Cusk describes the sense that she is indistinguishable from her baby in the first weeks of her daughter's life, calling this being "Motherbaby," and her anxiety at this loss of sovereignty is palpable in the figures she uses: "I feel like a house to which an extension has been added: where once there was a wall, now there is a new room. I feel my heat and light flowing vertiginously into it" (94). Depicting breastfeeding as the violent extraction of resources from the mother's body, Cusk writes, "I begin to feel like a stretch of unprotected wilderness, ringing with the shriek of chainsaws, the drill of oil wells" (99). She reflects, furthermore, on the triumph of (one kind of) capitalist logic in shifting breastfeeding recommendations: "In the old days, I am informed, women breastfed their babies for strictly twenty minutes every four hours. They weren't 'allowed,' they say, to do anything else" (98). Cusk reflects that this interdiction "has a sort of Marxist appeal, and hence has since been discredited": "The modern regime is all supply and demand. . . . The customer, it seems, is always right" (98-99). She describes "Motherbaby" as "brainless and clumsy as a dinosaur" (96) and herself as "a miasma of nurture" (98) and claims, "I have no subjectivity" (97).

Cusk's unsentimental portrayal of the horror or violation experienced in maternal acts of care, like breastfeeding, works powerfully to denaturalize these acts.[33] In fact, the moment Cusk first encounters her daughter, after her caesarean delivery, is described not as a loving union but rather as a kind of splitting:

> In this moment I realise that a person now exists who is me, but who is not confined to my body. She appears to be some sort of colony. What she needs and wants will vie with,

[33] The palpable sense of horror in Cusk's writing about motherhood prefigures a new subgenre of motherhood-horror noted by Alexandra Alter and Aviva Briefel. Writing in 2019, Alter points to "a growing body of surreal speculative fiction that uses horror tropes to capture the panic, self-doubt and pressures that new mothers face," mentioning, in particular, "[t]he exhaustion that verges on hallucination" and "[t]he feeling that your body has become a food source and no longer belongs to you."

> and often take priority over, what I need and want for the foreseeable future. I put her to the breast. The word "natural" appears in a sort of cartoon bubble in my head. . . . I feel as though someone is sucking my breast in public. (95)

In place of the effusion of the exceptional love of a mother for her child, a love one never thought possible and never felt before now, etc., that one expects at such moments, Cusk foregrounds loss and alienation. The fact that she and her baby are in competition for the same resources, that her baby depletes her energy in more ways than one, is experienced here as a physical threat. At the same time, Cusk describes a crisis of identity, as she understands the baby to be an extension of her, now problematically inhabiting two bodies. When, before this, a nurse suggests that she tries feeding her baby, Cusk is shocked, having just undergone surgery. Expecting to be cared for, she is asked to care for someone else. This, along with the new use to which her breasts must be put (she calls them "requisitioned, deprogrammed" [94]) feels to her not "natural" at all. Cusk wrote in a later essay that she was perplexed by the warning issued by a friend who read *A Life's Work* before it was published to "be prepared . . . your book is going to make people very angry" ("I Was Only"), and one imagines that this is one of the scenes Cusk's friend had in mind.

Quiney points out that many critics of motherhood memoirs that stray from "hegemonic" motherhood (23) object to "the claim of mothers to public speech," insisting "that maternal experiences are emphatically *not* subjects for theorizing or debate, that their public airing is indecent and may even indicate pathology on the part of the woman concerned" (25-26). Indeed, the angry and derisive reviews of *A Life's Work* are comparable to the negative reviews of Heti's *Motherhood*. First, both sets of reviews express disbelief that the writer would consider something so ordinary (in Cusk's case, infant care; in Heti's, the decision to have a child or not)

worthy of extended discussion. Both sets of reviews also condemn the writers for reflecting critically on motherhood. One reviewer of *A Life's Work* complained that the memoir is characterized by "trauma, grief and conflict" and asserted that "believe it or not, quite a few people enjoy motherhood. But in order to do so, it is important to grow up first" (Hornby). As I will discuss later, Alexandra Schwartz's review of *Motherhood* also dismisses the (in this case, unwilling) mother by accusing her of childishness. Another reviewer of *A Life's Work* claims that "Cusk's book is a timely manifestation of all that is wretched about grotesquely self-obsessed modern parenting," sarcastically noting that "[t]he real world is not like it is in storybooks, or indeed like it is inside your head. . . . You discover all sorts of extraordinary things, such as the fact that motherhood—fancy!—is no picnic; that having a baby really hurts and is unphotogenic to boot; that you feel quite lonely and isolated sometimes, and quite mad at others. Well done!" (Knight). Referring to Cusk and Naomi Wolf, whose book, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*, was published the same year, this reviewer asks, "Why was motherhood so shocking to them? Don't they have any friends, or mothers of their own, or siblings?"

Indeed, this is exactly the contradiction that concerns Cusk: how is it that, with mothers of their own, women still don't know what motherhood is like? Where is the community of women that might speak openly about motherhood? The answer comes through clearly in the punitive and caustic criticism of women whose narratives diverge from the unqualified affirmation of motherhood. It is worth noting, too, that Cusk also enjoys motherhood, as when she writes that the realization that she "could have [her daughter] for ever, could keep her" "engulf[s] [her] in uncontrollable feeling, in the ferment of love" (202); one gets the sense that reviewers simply could not see past the book's darker passages.

The outrage registered in the reception of the book (and the thrill, for more sympathetic readers, in reading Cusk's frank descriptions) demonstrates just how taboo it still is to make explicit the sense shared, at times, by many mothers—that one's baby is greedy, demanding too much, and that something of oneself is lost, perhaps irretrievably, in motherhood. The book's reception thus shows how, despite real changes in women's horizons of possibility and (some) changes in the gendered distribution of reproductive labor, the accepted discourses of motherhood are still profoundly sentimental. India Knight writes, "I am not sentimental, but to me, bringing a child into the world is the most wondrous and joyful thing there is. . . . The failure to recognize this—the wilful refusal to acknowledge the sheer exhilaration and wonder of the thing . . . seems to me shockingly self-indulgent." As Knight claims, above, "[t]he real world is not like it is in storybooks"—but Cusk's attempt to define reality differently, from the reality of care work, garners scorn. That the most irate reviews come from mothers suggests that we have not moved very far beyond the reproduction of suffering enforced by Meridian's mother in the mid-20th century: "You should *want* Eddie Jr. . . . Unless you're some kind of monster. . . . It's just selfishness. You ought to hang your head in shame" (Walker 88). Of course, Mrs. Hill does not affirm the joys of motherhood as Cusk's reviewers do, but rather is (humorously) candid about the fact that she "never wanted to have any" children (88). But there is a remarkably consistent sense that unwilling or unhappy mothers are shameful, monstrous, and selfish, and the fact that women police *each other* suggests that a feminist motherhood is urgently needed.

An unexpected break in the frustration and desperation of Cusk's first three months as a mother points toward an embodied maternal subjectivity that registers loss of sovereignty as an opportunity rather than an injury. In Cusk's telling, her daughter cries for three months straight; when she stops

> she has wrought herself. And she has wrought me, too, because although I have not helped or understood, I have been there all along and this, I suddenly and certainly know, is motherhood; this mere sufficiency, this presence. . . . the particular self I tried to bring to my care of her . . . [has] been as superfluous as my fury and despair. All that is required is for me to be there . . . Being myself is no compensation for not being there. (70)

As opposed to the crisis of sovereignty of the birth, when Cusk refuses to recognize her daughter as a separate being, now her daughter, having become a person, has remade Cusk. I am particularly interested in Cusk's insistence that her care for her infant is a form of presence but *not* help or knowledge. The attachment to self-determination that colors her account of finding herself "brainless and clumsy" gives way to an account of transformation through care that is, crucially, unthinking. That is, the passage above suggests that we might find some strategic value in being temporarily "brainless," in being "there" rather than being ourselves. The fundamental non-sovereignty of motherhood begins to shift in *A Life's Work* from a problem to an opportunity, and it is more fully fleshed out the novel trilogy as a standpoint that has political utility beyond the identity of the mother. This can be glimpsed, too, in *A Life's Work*, in the "unprotected wilderness" simile: how a mother relates to her body (or her subjectivity) has implications for everyone else in an economy of full extraction. The ambivalence in *A Life's Work* about maternal embodiment, which is seen as a problem in that it restricts freedom, resolves, in the novel trilogy, into an understanding of freedom *in* physical vulnerability, that is, a compromised, embodied subjectivity.

Discussing motherhood in *Outline*, a writer named Angeliki uses language that recalls the dilemma of unfreedom recounted in *A Life's Work*. She notes that "for many women . . . having a

child is their central experience of creativity, and yet the child will never remain a created object" and says of motherhood, "you have become a slave, obliterated! . . . The only hope . . . is to make your child and your husband so important in your own mind that your ego has enough sustenance to stay alive. But in fact . . . as Simone de Beauvoir observes, such a woman is nothing but a parasite, a parasite on her husband, a parasite on her child" (110-111). Angeliki imagines motherhood as an act that devours one's creativity and freedom. In a reversal of Cusk's image from *A Life's Work*, the mother is the parasite; in either case, mother and child are caught in a relation of dependency. But as Anne's story suggests that we ask: what kinds of description (or vision) might be possible if sovereignty is no longer the goal and dependency is a given? How might we see ourselves and each other more clearly?

Though the moment cited above is the only explicit reference to Beauvoir, she haunts Cusk's work: in its horrifying account of pregnancy; in its preoccupation with "freedom"; and in its concern with the relationship between artistic work and care work. Writing of household chores, Beauvoir claims that "this work does not even result in a lasting creation. . . . As soon as things are used, they are dirtied or destroyed . . . Covers, curtains, and clothes are eaten by moths: the world is not a dream carved in stone, it is made of a suspicious-looking substance threatened by decomposition" (483). Beauvoir makes the curious claim that "the wife's work within the home . . . is not directly useful to the group, it does not open onto the future, it does not produce anything," and for that reason "she is subjugated, secondary, parasitic" (484-85).

Beauvoir's writing about pregnancy is structured by the transcendence-immanence problematic that characterizes her philosophy of "existentialist morality": "Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to

transcend himself" (17). In Beauvoir's view, such "transcendence" is incompatible with pregnancy, which a woman

> experiences . . . both as an enrichment and a mutilation; the fetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it, and is possessed by it . . . What is unique about the pregnant woman is that at the very moment her body transcends itself, it is grasped as imminent: it withdraws into itself in nausea and discomfort; it no longer exists for itself alone and then becomes bigger than it has ever been. The transcendence of an artisan or a man of action is driven by a subjectivity, but for the future mother the opposition between subject and object disappears; she and this child who swells in her form an ambivalent couple that life submerges; snared by nature, she is plant and animal, a collection of colloids, an incubator, an egg . . . (538)

It is hard to perceive much beyond disgust toward biological reproduction in the phrase "snared by nature" and the metaphors that follow it. But Beauvoir's (at times sensational) focus on the biology of reproduction is remembered better than her insistence that reproduction, like everything else, is social and historical, and that contemporary woman

> can only consent to give life if life has meaning; she cannot try to be a mother without playing a role in economic, political, or social life. . . . In a properly organized society where the child would in great part be taken charge of by the group, where the mother would be cared for in health, motherhood would absolutely not be incompatible with women's work. (568)

According to Linda Zerilli, in Beauvoir's analysis, "the problem of freedom for women—initially formulated as a subject question and in terms of the free will of Woman in the singular—turns out to be a problem of transforming the conditions of a common world, hence as

a problem of political action" (11). Zerilli argues that the feminist reception of Beauvoir has tended to focus on her concern with identity ("that is, gender is made, not given") at the expense of her interest in world-making (11). I suggest that we read Beauvoir's (explicit and implicit) presence in Cusk's trilogy alongside the trilogy's interest in defining reality differently. The novels linger on the difficulty of reproductive work, the crisis faced by women who, believing themselves to be free, become "snared" by motherhood, to point to the possibility of remaking the world around care. What kind of a subject emerges if care is at the center of social life rather than the periphery?

A discussion of reproductive work in *Kudos*, the third novel in the trilogy, refigures Beauvoir's "ambivalent couple that life submerges" as the site of a new subjectivity and identifies a political opportunity in the dependency that structures motherhood. The writer, Linda, recalls an artistic residency where she begins missing chores and other burdens of family life: "At home she generally avoided doing housework . . . because those kinds of chores made her feel so unimportant that she wouldn't have been able to write anything afterwards" (51). Linda's opposition of art and chores recalls Beauvoir's distinction between the life of the mind and the materiality of domestic life. Beauvoir claims that because man "has access to the entire universe," he has little interest in domestic space, while women's domestic work, lacking teleology, is necessarily imprisoning: "the wife is not called to build a better world; the house, the bedroom, their dirty laundry, the wooden floors, are fixed things: she can do no more than rout out indefinitely the foul causes that creep in" (476). Linda also misses her husband and daughter, despite having looked forward to getting away from them: "I completely forgot the fact that being with [my daughter] sometimes makes me feel like I'm trapped in a room with a swarm of bees" (52).

The violence of this image resonates with a story Linda tells of a woman she sat next to on a plane, who skied over a cliff and had been "reassembled . . . out of metal rods," commenting that it "reminded [her] of having a kid . . . You survive your own death . . . and then there's nothing left to do except talk about it" (59). Interestingly, a woman also falls down a mountain at the beginning of *A Life's Work*: Cusk, having recently learned she was pregnant, ventures off-trail while backpacking in the Pyrenees and falls down a steep ice field, "cartwheeling in the air" (21) until a boulder stops her descent. Unable to move from her "rocky island," she reflects: "I appear to have dispersed any claim I might ever have made to courage or sense or humanity. I have surrendered the pretence of personality, its fraudulent offers of shelter, its nonexistent provision. I can help nobody, can protect nobody, can only sit and cry over the sorry fact of myself, a fact I appear only to have learned in the shadow of its destruction" (22). Returning home, she stays in bed for two weeks and when she finally gets up, she "ha[s] become a cocoon" (23). This near-death experience recalls Cusk's description of being remade in the first three months of her daughter's life, her sense of her "particular self" being "superfluous" in the care of a newborn; rather than "personality," what is required is presence. The various near- or after-death experiences in Cusk—motherhood as surviving one's own death, the annihilation of Cusk's self on the mountain, and the "creative death" after the devastating critical response to *Aftermath*—yield a new negotiation of freedom forged in dependency. There is nothing pure about this freedom, which, rather than striding forward from a coherent subjectivity, constantly reassembles itself from the pieces of its own ruin. The novels suggest that the mother is able to cultivate a particular form of attention that makes this non-sovereign freedom visible.

"Female Invisibility"

Another conversation in *Kudos* suggests a connection between non-sovereign maternal subjectivity and Cusk's evacuated realism. A television journalist talks to Faye about the artist Louise Bourgeois, specifically the drawings Bourgeois completed

> when [she] was the mother of small children, in which she portrays herself as a spider, and what is interesting about these works is not just what they convey about the condition of motherhood . . . but also the fact that they appear to be children's drawings drawn in a child's hand. It is hard to think . . . of a better example of female invisibility than these drawings, in which the artist herself has disappeared and exists only as the benign monster of her child's perception. (190)

Cusk's novels ask: in what way does this invisibility present an opportunity to the artist? This "female invisibility" recalls Cusk's description, in *Aftermath*, of being an observer: "To observe is not to not feel—in fact it is to put yourself at the mercy of feeling, like the child's warm skin meeting the cold air of midnight" (62). By becoming "invisible," these mother-artists expose themselves to the world ("the cold air of midnight") in a way that renders a new, feminist vision of reality.

The journalist claims "that in fact there was nothing worse than to be an average white male of average talents and intelligence: even the most oppressed housewife . . . is closer to the drama and poetry of life than he is, because as Louise Bourgeois shows us she is capable at least of holding more than one perspective" (192). The housewife's ability to see differently follows, perhaps, from her perception of the falseness of a "reality" that declares that all people are self-creating and self-governing, and therefore free. This ability to hold more than one perspective, which is what all novels aspire to, is particularly sharp in the *Outline* trilogy, which puts the

reader in closer contact with these perspectives, "at the mercy of feeling," by making the narrator "invisible."

The journalist adds that while girls today are, by many metrics, successful, "if you looked only a little way ahead . . . you could see that the girls' ambitions led nowhere, like the roads you often find yourself on in this country, that start off new and wide and smooth and then simply stop in the middle of nowhere, because the government ran out of money to finish building them" (192). *Kudos* takes place in an unnamed southern European country (probably Portugal), and the return of the theme of post-2008 austerity reminds us that Cusk cultivates the hollowed-out subjectivity of the mother as a model for all people living in a time when more and more people find that sovereignty is impossible. Therefore, I read this journalist's reference to what motherhood taught Bourgeois not as an appeal to a fixed or essentialist maternal subjectivity, but rather as pointing to a possible model for political subjectivity that experiments with "invisibility" and with "holding more than one perspective." As Cusk's novels demonstrate, the aim of such hollowing-out is not passivity or letting everything in, and not an apolitical acceptance of the conditions of life, but rather a more acute capacity for observation. This form of attention—the feminist imaginary that Cusk's novels construct—demonstrates that dependency is a shared condition. It thus resists the logic of austerity that justifies the neglect of those who need or provide care by making dependency a moral failing.

From Choice to Possibility in *Motherhood*

In *A Life's Work*, Cusk writes, after the exhausting first months of her daughter's life, "The question of what a woman is if she is not a mother has been superseded for me by that of what a woman is if she *is* a mother; and of what a mother, in fact, is" (57-58). While Sheila

Heti's narrator in *Motherhood* appears to be concerned with the first question, the novel demonstrates that the question of reproduction constructs all women, whether they are mothers or not, and therefore *Motherhood* might be said to answer Cusk's second question as follows: a mother is anyone who *might* be a mother.

Like *A Life's Work*, *Motherhood* received mixed reviews. The novel's detractors found fault with its distinctive narrative style or registered irritation with (what they assumed to be) its subject matter: the decision not to have children. *Motherhood* is narrated by someone very similar to Sheila Heti: a woman writer, partnered with a man, who is approaching 40 and trying to decide whether to have a child. The novel is ruminative and episodic, with the action firmly centered in the narrator's consciousness (which, more often than not, reviewers took to be the author's consciousness). A Kirkus review dismissed *Motherhood*'s "unfiltered self-absorption" and "absence of a compelling story" ("Motherhood"), and Alexandra Schwartz, observing no distinction between the novel's author and its narrator, accused Heti of being "petulant," "childish," and "bratty" and of "throwing a . . . tantrum" in the space of just five sentences. Christine Smallwood claimed that the novel is "interested only in abstraction" and that Heti's "business is a solipsistic existentialism, straight up." Her review also insisted on reading the novel's most interesting qualities in relation to the experience of motherhood (that is, Smallwood's own). Smallwood argues that motherhood "is so utterly transformative that the person evaluating the decision is a different version of the person who made it. That is why it's exciting. It remakes the world. *Motherhood* offers something else—loyalty to the version of the person Heti is now." Smallwood maintains that this constitutes a desire to "sto[p] time," the implication being that loyalty to one's present self is, like the desire to stop time, impossible or irrelevant.

In her treatment of the novel's refusal of motherhood, Smallwood fails to take seriously the decision not to have children in just the way that Heti describes when she writes, "I don't want 'not a mother' to be part of who I am—for my identity to be the negative of someone else's positive identity" (157). How does a woman construct a meaningful, positive identity around childlessness? The expectation that a woman will become a mother is not experienced equally across racial, class, sexual, and gender identities; women of color, queer and trans women, and poor women are often chastised, implicitly or explicitly, for having children. That said, a woman of any race who refuses motherhood is likely to encounter resistance to her choice from her family, friends, or partner, and while queer women are sometimes dissuaded from having children, they are at other times subject to pronatalist discourse. Furthermore, the fact that many poor women in the United States carry unwanted pregnancies to term because they cannot afford an abortion offers a sharp critique to the notion that the state wants to prevent babies of color from being born. I follow Jenny Brown's argument that in an era of low Global North birthrates, the state devalues black and brown lives at the same time that it coerces women of all races into having children (115-19). Furthermore, while *Motherhood* thinks about reproduction from the perspective of a cis-woman, the novel's project to construct a meaningful identity around not-motherhood is relevant to all women who are subject to a patriarchal understanding of reproduction—that is, all women. As Smallwood observes, the decision to have a child changes a person in a way that no childless person can understand. But how might the decision to remain childless be itself "transformative" in a way that Smallwood can't understand?

I suspect that *Motherhood* aroused so much ire precisely because of the convergence of self-absorption and the question of motherhood. Smallwood notes that "*Motherhood* is claustrophobic, like a diary, or a day with a newborn, and shapeless, even inchoate. It exists only

to keep existing." Though I disagree that the novel is "shapeless," I agree that it is epistemologically "inchoate"; this is one of its virtues. I wish Smallwood had lingered over the implications of her claim: what might Heti's recursive, cyclical novel, which does sometimes feel "claustrophobic," have to say about how the question of reproduction structures mothers and non-mothers alike? Along similar lines, Willa Paskin claims that "Heti . . . already writes like a mother," arguing that *Motherhood* fits right in with a genre Paskin thinks of as "mom lit," whose form ("short sections") and style ("discursive and epigrammatic") provide "an elegant solution to the problem of the constantly interrupting small child." Paskin concludes that Heti "shouldn't have children if she doesn't want to, but not because doing so would keep her from writing another book—maybe even a better one."

Smallwood and Paskin's reviews, intelligent in many ways, demonstrate just how illegible the question of reproduction is for many readers when it does not lead to the affirmation of reproduction. They also demonstrate that even when a reader claims to be interested in the novel's formal properties, as Smallwood does, the tendency to read the novel as a memoir keeps resurfacing. Smallwood is perplexed by the extent to which the novel lingers on the question of children: "If Heti does want a child, what is preventing her—is it Miles, or her own adolescent notions of freedom? If she doesn't want a child, why can't she just get on with not having one?" The tendency to misread this novel as nonfiction (leading Rebecca Van Laer to demand that Heti "admit" that she had written a memoir) makes illegible the novel's most urgent project, the reconstitution of the question of reproductive choice. Reading *Motherhood* as an account of the author's deliberation over whether to have a child obscures the novel's deconstruction of the notion of choice, which happens, the novel makes clear, through the act of writing.

The point of this novel is not to argue for childlessness over motherhood, as some defensive reviews by women with children seem to imply. *Motherhood* is engaged, rather, in the project that Irigaray calls for: to define motherhood from the perspective of women. As both Irigaray and Heti make clear, this project must be shared by all women, mothers or not. In the section quoted above, when Heti's narrator reflects, "I don't want 'not a mother' to be part of who I am," she proposes that she think of herself instead as "*not 'not a mother,'*" but then makes the unusual move of showing that this distinction aligns her more closely with mothers: "someone who is called a mother could also say, 'In fact, I am not not a mother.' Which means she is a mother, for the *not* cancels out the *not*. To be *not not* is what the mothers can be, and what the women who are not mothers can be. This is the term we can share" (157-58). Heti's narrator uses the double-negative to signal her rejection of a negative identity, and she suggests that mothers use it to distinguish themselves from non-mothers. By claiming, though, that non-mothers and mothers can "share" the term "*not not*," Heti suggests that constructing a new understanding of motherhood requires strategic negation, a clearing of the field that might allow women to see what they have in common. This moment also recalls Irigaray's claim, quoted earlier, that not only must mothers be perceived *as women* (particularly by their daughters) in order to redefine motherhood from a feminist perspective, but women without children must recognize that they "are always mothers once [they] are women"—that patriarchal motherhood constructs them, too ("Bodily Encounter" 43). Women must reckon with this fact and generate, through the question of reproduction, a feminist freedom.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Heti's novel demonstrates that one effect of the patriarchal definition of motherhood is that the "choice" that the narrator faces offers no good outcome: both options are associated, under patriarchy, with lack. Heti registers this dilemma as

follows: “For how long am I expected to live as though there is a second me, hiding somewhere inside?” (190). Put slightly differently, Sally Rooney outlines the narrator’s “double-bind” as “to be childless, and therefore less important than a mother; or to be a mother, and therefore less important than one’s children.” The freedom that Heti’s narrator seeks cannot be found in either choice, so the novel attempts to create another option. It is thus invested in the project that Irigaray calls for: “If it is not to become traumatizing or pathological, the question of whether or not to have children must be asked against the background of an other generating, of a creation of images and symbols” (“Bodily Encounter” 43).

Instead of choice, the novel emphasizes possibility and creativity: a holding-open of meaning around motherhood in order to rethink it. In this way, the novel generates a new field from which to make the choice by fleshing out a positive identity of “not a mother.” The novel recognizes that, as Smallwood notes, this identity is as yet “shapeless” and “inchoate,” but unlike Smallwood, it sees this as an artistic and political opportunity. If Heti’s novel is “like a day with a newborn,” then maybe there is something strangely similar about motherhood and its opposite. By showing what it might mean to be “not a mother,” Heti’s novel has implications for motherhood and womanhood, along the lines that Irigaray describes. It theorizes a form of freedom that is “shapeless” and “inchoate,” perhaps, but more generative than freedom that has reproductive choice as its horizon, that says that a woman is free if she can choose whether to have a child (still, unfortunately, a big “if” for many women). Heti’s novel shows this freedom to be incomplete.

Diana Tietjens Meyers also points to constraints around the choice to have children in her discussion of pronatalism and women’s autonomy. Meyers argues that in a culture of “matrigyno-idolatry,” the costs of motherhood are significantly understated, and there is a dearth

of images of fulfilled, childless women. As a result, it is rare for a woman to make a "fully autonomous" decision about reproduction (758). Even that minority of women firmly opposed to having children is limited by pronatalism, according to Meyer, as the need to constantly defend this choice may preclude more nuanced reflection (763). Heti's novel undertakes the project that Meyers calls for, for women to "find discursive means to symbolize their particular relations to motherhood and through these self-figurations resist their homogenization in matrigynist ideology" (766). But Meyers's serious misreading of Irigaray points to the importance of considering motherhood and non-motherhood together, as part of the same phenomenon. Meyers accuses Irigaray of "'feminist' matrigynism," pointing to the line (quoted earlier), "It is always necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women" (Meyers 759). Presumably, Meyers takes this statement to mean that a woman's anatomy destines her for motherhood, but any close reading of Irigaray demonstrates that she is concerned with the patriarchal *construction* of femininity and the urgency of a feminist counter-construction. Irigaray's point is rather the opposite of what Meyers takes it to be: that women who eschew motherhood should not assume that they have thereby escaped the cultural meanings of maternity (as every woman knows who finds herself doing extra care work, in all sorts of contexts). Meyers's call for women to "devis[e] imagery that expresses [their] identity" in order to define womanhood apart from patriarchal motherhood is also Irigaray's project (767). Irigaray recognizes, perhaps more so than Meyers, that mothers and non-mothers must do this together, in order to affirm and even *rewrite* motherhood and not-motherhood from a feminist perspective.

Motherhood points to possibilities for political world-making around possibility rather than self-possessed choice, developing a concept of freedom in line with Grosz's feminist, materialist freedom. Grosz draws from Henri Bergson's action-focused, intersubjective concept

of freedom, which emphasizes "indetermination" rather than interiority ("Feminism" 150). Grosz refers to Bergson's claim that "we choose in defiance of what is conventionally called a motive, and this absence of any tangible reason is the more striking the deeper our freedom goes" (qtd. in Grosz, "Feminism" 148). Here, Bergson retains "choice," but defines it in a way that makes it utterly foreign to mainstream notions of a choice as the result of private deliberation. Pointing out that "both libertarians and determinists share the belief that the subject is the same subject, the same entity, before and after the alternatives have been posed and one chosen," Grosz notes that Bergson focuses not on whether a subject is free, but rather on whether an act is free ("Feminism" 144). Considering freedom as a quality of a person makes no sense when people are always changing and are therefore never identical with themselves. This concept of freedom—unpredictable, open, taking shape in the world of other beings and objects—resonates in *Motherhood*'s visions of writing and the self.

Contingency in Writing

While it is easy to conflate *Motherhood*'s narrator with its author, the novel is more than a lightly-fictionalized set of diary entries, as some critics imply, and certain formal features of the novel contest the claim that it is "shapeless" (Smallwood). First, the novel alternates between ruminative prose and sections composed of questions and answers. As Heti explains in a prefatory note, she adapts an *I Ching* practice of flipping three coins to answer yes-or-no questions. The coins thus "answer" the questions that Heti's narrator poses, encouraging her to refine questions and change direction in her thinking. Secondly, the novel is structured by the narrator's menstrual cycle, with sections titled "Follicular," "PMS," and "Bleeding." The narrator's moods vary sharply with the phases of her cycle; her life feels different to her at these

different times. These structuring principles emphasize that writing and living are contingent acts. They also suggest that, as Heti has stated in interviews, novels make meaning by holding open possibilities rather than outlining or defending a position. This is what critics who object to "Heti's" inability to decide (and her subjection of the reader to that extended indecision) miss: that what the novel achieves is the generation of a new way of thinking rather than the defense of an existing one.[34]

It is important, moreover, to read the novel *as* a novel in order to distinguish between what the narrator says or knows and what the novel suggests. The narrator frequently sets her artistic work against the possibility of having a child, as if she must choose between writing and motherhood, and often figures the book she is writing as another kind of child. In the novel's opening section, for example, she misspeaks, calling a hot dog a banana, and then claims that she must "transform the greyish and muddy landscape of my mind into a solid and concrete thing, utterly apart from me . . . I had to create a monster apart from me, that knew more than I knew, had a world view, and did not get such simple words wrong" (1-2). This "monster" could be a child or a book, and at other points in the novel, the narrator seems to conceive of the art object as autonomous, as a justification for not having a child, or as otherwise self-possessed, talismanic, and powerful. But despite these moments, the notion of literature put forward by this novel emphasizes not the separateness of a work of art but rather its permeability and changeability. While the novel may seem to set up a "choice" between the two things the narrator might create—a baby or a book—a closer reading establishes connections between the novel the narrator is writing and the body of the narrator herself, rather than a hypothetical child. Both the narrator's body and her novel are characterized by changeability and possibility, and so

[34] Heti has described the novelist as occupying "a questioning and doubtful position" and says, "I don't know why you would write if you already know what you think. Wouldn't that be boring?" (Miller and Bailar 154, 170).

while the narrator's anxiety about reproductive and artistic work sometimes seems to reinforce a masculinist notion of the artist as isolated from labors of care or maintenance, the text ultimately finds freedom in contingency rather than in the ability to make choices. (For example: the narrator's state of mind is subject to her fluctuating hormones, and later, to the anti-depressants she takes; living through this is a kind of freedom.)

In this way, the novel interrupts the discourse of reproductive choice, both because the narrator is constructed by reproduction regardless of her "choice," but also because the narrator, who in the end "chooses" not to have a child, is not thereby in "possession" of her own body. Finally, as Heti points out in an interview, a "choice" about reproduction is never final; she claims that in *Motherhood*, "[n]othing is ever decided for good," though "[t]here is a moment of release at the end" (Miller and Bailar 168). When the interviewers contrast Heti's narrator's indecision with "[t]he choice to become a mother," which they say is "definitive," Heti disagrees, claiming that mothers must choose to continue mothering: "To say that mothers aren't also making a choice every day to mother—because a mother is just a sort of biological creature that is bound to the child—is a way of denying mothers full humanity and agency" (Miller and Bailar 169).[35] In this way, *Motherhood* demonstrates that the state that non-mothers and mothers share is a fundamental non-sovereignty which becomes the precondition for writing and for world-making more generally. Rather than a subject who exercises and maintains sovereignty through her choices, the novel delineates a subject who recognizes that she and the world create each other from moment to moment. Motherhood, even when refused, dispels any notion that people govern themselves.

[35] While I appreciate Heti's attention to this nuance, I also think that there is something irreversible about becoming a mother; as Orna Donath points out, even mothers living apart from their children or whose children have died report feeling that the identity of "mother" defines them above all (121-22).

In the coin-flipping sections of the book, the narrator's negotiation of the coins' answers is by turns funny, profound, and strange. When she consults the coins about a "premise" for the novel, and the coins reject one of her choices, she asks, "Am I allowed to betray you?" (9). In another instance, the coins help direct an arrangement of ritual objects to stop the narrator's nightmares; they reject one knife, for example, in place of another, and guide her to set the knife in a specific place in her bedroom—all through yes-or-no questions (62-66). (The text includes photographs of the two knives and of the chosen knife on a dresser, a nightstand, and a windowsill.) Reflecting on a tense moment with her boyfriend which she has interpreted with the help of the coins, the narrator reflects,

> It's too bad I projected that onto him, just as I'm projecting onto you, coins, the wisdom of the universe. But it's useful, this, as a way of interrupting my habits of thought with a *yes* or a *no*. I feel like my brain is becoming more flexible as I use these coins. When I get an answer I didn't expect, I have to push myself to find another answer—hopefully a better one. . . . My thoughts don't just end where they normally would. (77)

The coin-flipping changes the narrator's thinking by extending her thoughts and disrupting thought patterns. By building chance into the novel's narrative structure, the coins exist in productive tension with a more masculinist conception of art that also runs through the narrative (and that sometimes emanates from the narrator's boyfriend, Miles). This tension is on display, for instance, in an exchange with the coins in which the narrator discusses art and reproduction:

> Is art at home in the world?
>
> *yes*
>
> Is art a living thing—while one is making it, that is? As living as anything else we call living?

yes

Is it as living as when it is bound in a book or hung on a wall?

yes

Then can a woman who makes books be let off the hook by the universe for not making the living thing we call babies?

yes

Oh good! I feel so guilty about it sometimes, thinking it's what I should do, because I always think that animals are happiest when they live out their instincts. Maybe not happiest, but feel most alive. Yet making art makes me feel alive, and taking care of others doesn't make me feel as alive. Maybe I have to think about myself less as a woman with this woman's special task, and more as an individual with her own special task—not put *woman* before my individuality. Is that right?

no

Is it that making babies is *not* a woman's special task?

yes

I should not be asking questions in the negative. *Is* it her special task?

yes (24-25)

The narrator proceeds to ask several more follow-up questions to gain clarity on this topic, which never quite comes.

I quote this section at length to demonstrate the (at times frustrating) movement of the text between liberating and claustrophobic ideas about art and gender. The notion that art is a living thing challenges the idea, also present in the book, that art must be shielded from the hostile, draining processes of motherhood, care, and even politics. But the narrator draws from

this sense of art's vitality the conclusion that art is in competition with motherhood. This section demonstrates the way in which this book, with such seemingly earnest moments, invites a straightforward, autobiographical reading, and yet at the same time frustrates such a reading. In my own case, I feel repulsed by the narrator's suggestion that we think about women as comparable to "animals . . . liv[ing] out their instincts" and offended by her implication that women artists (and no others?) may be excused from motherhood. I'm also perplexed and disturbed by the narrator's distinction between "woman" and "individual," both because it implies a sexless (male?) definition of "individual" and because it valorizes atomization. But the coins' rejection of some of the narrator's reflections reminds me, again, that the novel does not necessarily affirm the thinking of its narrator, and that this narrator is trying out different lines of thinking. It is tempting, though, to read these passages as the ruminations of Heti herself (as many reviewers did), and even to find oneself wondering if Heti flipped coins as she wrote the novel (a second prefatory note to the novel states, "In this book, all results from the flipping of coins result from the flipping of actual coins"). These coins, then, encourage not only the narrator, but also the reader, to be more flexible in their thinking, as this narrative device points particularly to the indistinct area between novel and memoir, which has been troubling for many of *Motherhood*'s readers. That is, by prompting an image, perhaps, of Sheila Heti flipping coins, the coins prompt the reader to confront their own reading practices, particularly their assumptions about genre.

Another section engages with gender and art through the concept of the avant-garde. When the narrator visits a friend, Mairon, who has recently had a baby and who urges the narrator to do the same, the narrator wonders if she will have "an *avant-garde life*." Mairon responds, "*That's not what life is. There is no such thing as an avant-garde life*" (34). The

narrator reflects on "these dangerous and beautiful sirens, like Mairon" whose "song . . . lulls the soul and body into a fatal lethargy . . . the beginning of one's corruption" and urges herself to "resist like the monks who resist lying with women—no matter how good it would make them feel" (34-35). Though a reader might understandably chafe at Mairon's pressuring the narrator to have a baby, the narrator's response is disturbingly consonant with classically misogynistic patterns of associating women's sexuality and motherhood with contamination, distraction, the loss of life force, and ruin. In this section, too, Miles announces "that one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both" (35). (Miles, who often gives the narrator advice about art, is not an artist himself.) Jacques Rancière points to a fundamental confusion in understandings of the avant-garde, both in general and as it relates to modernism: while the avant-garde is sometimes considered to be "the force that marches in the lead, that has a clear understanding of the movement . . . determines the direction of historical evolution, and chooses subjective political orientations," it is also imagined as "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come" (29). The first concept lends itself to a masculinist understanding of art, seen, for example, in movements like futurism and in some of the conceptual art that Mierle Laderman Ukeles criticizes in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, as I discussed in chapter 1. In the second understanding, though, the avant-garde *is* life itself; to separate it from the material processes of life would make no sense.

This section of the novel plays with this very tension, reinforcing, on the one hand, the distinction between care work and art that Rancière and Ukeles show to be incoherent and, furthermore, presenting women as threatening to the avant-garde. On the other hand, Mairon says, "There is no such thing as an avant-garde life," which we could also read as: the category of "avant-garde" makes no sense when applied to one's life; or perhaps as: every life is avant-

garde. The novel's engagement with contingency, both in its structure and in the narrator's embodiment, suggests that the narrator wrestles with the gendered (and unimaginative) distinction between avant-garde and boring/female/compromised *on her way to* a notion of art that does not punish or reject the reproductive body. This concept of art as changeable and permeable rather than isolated and pure is closely connected to the novel's deconstruction of reproductive choice.

Dynamic Embodiment

In considering the question of reproduction, the narrative deconstructs the concept of "choice" itself, troubling the kind of coherent, rational interiority assumed by such a concept.[36] Reflecting on a friend's conviction that an Intrauterine Device "wouldn't be right" for her, the narrator feels "excluded from some deeper knowledge she had" and tells the friend "*I bet you always consult your heart*." The narrator says, "I don't think I have a heart—a heart I can consult. Instead, I have these coins" (117). In her study of "the cultural crafting and apparatuses of vision" in debates over reproduction and reproductive technologies, Valerie Hartouni notes that the pro-life movement's mobilization of imaging technologies establishes an opposition not only between fetus and woman, but between "truth," represented by technologies like the sonogram, and "desire," represented by the woman's choice (3). She quotes a 1989 report on the news program, *Nightline*, which states, "With new technologies peering into the womb, women

[36] The notion that a person surveys a field of options and chooses one assumes, first, a distinction or distance between the person and the field. An overemphasis on "choice" denies that people are continuously shaped by their circumstances. I maintain that feminists might question "choice" without rejecting the notion of autonomy altogether. I agree with Diana Tietjens Meyers that feminism should think about autonomy, as long as "[t]he autonomous individual is an evolving subject—a subject who is in charge of her life within the limits of imperfect introspective decipherability and welcome, though in some ways intrusive (or downright harmful), social relations; a subject who fashions her self-portrait and shapes her self-narrative through a process of skillful self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction" (744).

have been forced to peer into their hearts," and notes that this formulation registers an interruption in the traditional linking of women's reproductivity (uterus) with their "'special ability' to read the heart and coherently render its teachings": "If women must be 'forced' to peer into their hearts, forced to do what once took place 'naturally,' something has ruptured an organic system of communication, of 'knowing' and 'doing'; something is clearly awry and that 'something' appears to be legalized abortion" (38-40). Viewed in this light, the moment cited above suggests an alternative to *both* women as naturally intuitive and women's choices as needing correction. By moving from a discussion of contraception and self-knowing choice to the randomness of the coins, the novel suggests that the narrative of reproductive choice is insufficient for women's freedom. For one, a reproductive rights framework does not acknowledge the need to support reproduction among women whose reproduction has been prevented or punished.[37] And as Hartouni points out, choices are easily dismissed; in the case of abortion, women's choices are depicted as secondary to and necessarily less reliable than the "truth" of reproductive imaging technologies. In response to this crisis of choice, Heti's novel develops an alternative economy of artistic knowing that is open to uncertainty and insistently embodied.

When the coins initially refuse the narrator her proposed book subject of "the soul of time," the narrator asks if she should "*embody* [*the soul of time*] rather than *explain it*," and the coins reply in the affirmative. "The soul of time" is a central concept in the narrative, and this

[37] SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective coined the phrase "reproductive justice" in 1994 in order to argue that 1) many women of color may not have access to abortion, regardless of the choice; 2) women of color in the United States and elsewhere have been historically coerced and forced into sterilization and long-term contraception; and 3) a living wage, childcare, support for survivors of domestic violence, and prenatal health care are also "reproductive" issues. SisterSong argues, in effect, that social justice and reproduction must be considered together. Dorothy Roberts points out that liberal feminism's focus on contraception and abortion rights ignores the coerced or forced sterilization of women of color that was widespread in the United States in the twentieth century and the government's refusal to provide support to poor mothers, particularly mothers of color (5-6).

soul works to contest the Western concept of the soul as an abstracted region of moral purity for a self-governing subject, fleshing out instead an embodied subjectivity. Elaborating on "*the soul of time*" in a conversation with a friend, the narrator states that "either we as individuals have no souls, but experience a sort of collective soul that either belongs to time or *is* time, or . . . our lives—*we*—are time's soul." The narrator finds "the idea that my soul was not my possession very comforting" (8). Here, the narrative offers an alternative to the individualistic notion of the soul critiqued by Herbert Marcuse as an accessory of "affirmative culture," which "plays off the spiritual world against the material world by holding up culture as the realm of authentic values and self-contained ends in opposition to the world of social utility and means" ("Affirmative" 95). Marcuse tracks through Western philosophy an elaboration of the soul as the "noncorporeal being of man" which "is asserted as the real substance of the individual" and analyzes how this idealism, when mixed with Enlightenment liberalism, in which "[e]ach individual is immediate to himself," absorbs popular discontent, preventing radical change ("Affirmative" 104, 102).

Irigaray develops a related critique of the soul from a feminist perspective, connecting it to masculine abstraction in her analysis of how woman is both constructed by and always exceeds the necessarily masculine "subject." Irigaray discusses gynecological vision/science/medicine, and specifically the concave mirror, as figures for the masculinist process of defining women's "pleasure . . . as the hollow, the intaglio, the negative . . . of its phallic assertions" ("Any Theory" 124). In Irigaray's analysis, the construction of the (masculine) subject both denies and bases itself upon the "wife/mother," which has the effect of suturing women's sexuality to reproduction at the same time that it disembodies the subject, creating a "soul": "But once you . . . interpret the subject's need to re-duplicate himself in a thought—or maybe a 'soul'?—then the function of the 'other' is stripped of the veils that still

shroud it" ("Any Theory" 120). Here as elsewhere in her work, Irigaray's attention to the female body aims not to reinforce sexual difference but rather to insist that that difference—the "matter" against which the male/disembodied subject defines itself—is not "inert," but rather dynamic. A feminist subject would yield an entirely different understanding of the relationship between subject and object and a different kind of soul. Significantly, Irigaray shows that a patriarchal theory of the subject (as a discrete being capable of abstracting itself into a soul) rests on a particular understanding of the mother: as passive, background, and above all, static or finished.[38]

Heti similarly contests subject-formation that abstracts and isolates, and her novel suggests that a reconsideration of motherhood is essential to this project. The narrator's claim that her soul is *not* her possession interrupts the soul's association with atomization and abstraction, and furthermore, the narrative embodies the soul in a way that reunites it with politics and the material realm. In this way, the novel seeks to construct a specifically feminist imaginary, and therefore, though it may not explicitly engage with contemporary politics, it is a grave misreading to assert, as Smallwood does, that Heti "has no political concerns."

Thinking about her biological clock, the narrator reflects that women live in time while men live in space. This distinction is connected not only to the question of reproduction itself, but also to the narrator's menstrual cycle. A friend suggests that PMS "*IS the soul of time. That's why it's so unpleasant*" (108). If the soul of time is a collective soul, or time's soul, but in either case an entity that dissolves the individual soul, and the soul of time is the experience of physical and emotional distress experienced by menstruating women—the same experience routinely used

[38] Irigaray writes, "when will they cease to equate women's sexuality with her reproductive organs, to claim that her sexuality has value only insofar as it gathers the heritage of her maternity? When will man give up the need or desire to drink deep in all security from his wife/mother in order to go and show off to his brothers and buddies the fine things he formed while suckling his nurse?" ("Any Theory" 127).

against women, to argue for their inconsistency and irrationality—then cis-women's embodied changeability and suffering has implications, more generally, for concepts of the human. As the narrator speculates, "Maybe my moods are evidence of how a human is part of time, or is bound to time, or *is* time" (107). PMS, in other words, is presented here not as a woman's problem, but as a threat to the bounded, rational self that claims to be ahistorical or timeless. As Beauvoir writes:

> Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity, whereas he considers woman's body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularizes it. (5)

Male privilege, as formulated by Beauvoir, entails a certain transparency of the body: it is there, but it doesn't interfere with the more elevated processes of the intellect. (We might also understand this as a form of disembodiment.) Heti does something similar, insisting that the female narrator's hormonal mood swings demonstrate that all people, regardless of gender, are part of time or *are* time. But whereas Beauvoir is most concerned (even horrified) by the experiences in which woman's subjectivity is indistinguishable from her embodiment, as I discussed earlier, Heti fully inhabits the charge that woman "thinks with her hormones": that hormonal fluctuations affect her art-making, her relationships, and her sense of what is possible. While the novel's structure and content foreground the narrator's cyclical mood swings, an experience particular to the biological female sex, its reflection on PMS as "*the soul of time*" suggests that this experience has something to say about people of all genders. Rather than envisioning a self (or soul) that garners authority insofar as it resists the forces that seek to

disorient it, the narrative constructs from the experience of PMS a model of subjectivity that is inseparable from the processes of time and change. For this subject, freedom is "not a freedom of selection . . . but a freedom of action that is above all connected to an active self, an embodied being, a being who acts in a world of other beings and objects" (Grosz, "Feminism" 147).

The narrator also speculates that "the soul of time" has "something to do with cocoons," and she articulates through this image a model of selfhood that disarticulates freedom from choice. The narrator describes her state while writing as a "cocoon" in which her "self becomes mush, and something new is formed." This self "is the me I most recognize as me . . . It is not a me that is concerned with making choices or anything: it's a self without form, unimprisoned" (228). In a striking inversion of traditional accounts of self-definition through writing, the cocoon figures the generation of a new way of being through self-dissolution. This image suggests, furthermore, that the authentic—and significantly, artistic—self is not, as liberalism would have it, the self that chooses, but rather the self that does not. This cocoon points toward a notion of freedom in indeterminacy, forged through the question of reproduction.

As Heti hints at when her narrator states that mothers and non-mothers can "share" the term "*not not*," a non-sovereign, interdependent freedom might provide a more coherent orienting concept for feminism than "choice." The novel proposes that while the absence of reproductive choice is certainly oppressive to women, so is the choice itself. After another woman writer characterizes the question of children as a "civil war" among women, the narrator reflects that this question "suddenly seemed like a huge conspiracy to keep women in their thirties—when you finally have some brains and some skills and experience—from doing anything useful with them at all. It is hard to when such a large portion of your mind, at any given time, is preoccupied with the possibility" (90). Reproductive choice is not sufficient for

women's liberation because the burden of this choice is still unevenly distributed on women, circumscribing their lives whether they have children or not. Willa Paskin's misreading of this moment is revealing; she points to it as one of the novel's better moments, but notes that the conspiracy is "motherhood," when in fact, Heti's narrator is saying that the *question* of children is what dominates women's thirties. In the moment in question, the narrator is in a bar discussing this question with another thirty-something woman writer, and the narrator notes that it is "unfair . . . that we had to sit here talking about it, feeling like if we didn't have children, *we would always regret it*." This question "didn't seem to preoccupy the drunken men" in the bar "at all" (90). In other words, what women have to deal with that men do not isn't just unevenly distributed reproductive labor, but also the choice itself. One of the handful of reviewers of *Motherhood* who discuss their own experiences as mothers, Paskin seems unable to see how *not*-motherhood circumscribes a woman's life. For example, Paskin criticizes a mundane detail from the novel as an example of a "section that, perhaps, someone not performing all the endless time she has might have cut." Heti's point, though, is that her narrator's time *is not free* (though it may seem that way to someone overburdened by motherhood) because she is occupied—for an entire decade—with this difficult decision.

Furthermore, even though she is not a mother, as a woman who *might* be a mother, the narrator experiences the effects of the persistent failure to grant the mother "a purpose apart from her existence for her child," as Jessica Benjamin puts it in her study of psychoanalytic accounts of the mother-child bond (23-24). The narrator asks, "For how long am I expected to live as though there is a second me, hiding somewhere inside? When will it finally feel safe to prioritize the *me* I know?" (190). This moment registers a kind of tyranny of interiority, playing out in at least two senses: the potential child "within" a woman, and the self-possessed interiority

assumed by narratives of choice. Though the narrator's stated desire to prioritize the "me" she knows may seem to reinforce an atomism of the individual, the self that she knows is not bounded, discrete, or final.

"Motherhood" as Attention

I return now to the concept of attention that, I claimed earlier, characterizes Cusk's narrative style. I related this style to feminist theories from the 1980s that developed, from the standpoint of the woman or mother, a form of attention that would lead to justice for all people. Against a common reading of standpoint theory, I argued that this theory is more precisely about the way the subject engages with the world—that is, her form of attention—rather than her essence or identity. Such a reading of standpoint rhymes well with Cusk's narration, but it seems less obviously applicable to Heti's narrator, who has been accused of being stiflingly narcissistic and who, in the most generous reading, is certainly occupied with her own thoughts. A popular critical reading of *Motherhood*, as I stated earlier, is that the book is about a choice between two identities: mother or not-mother. In this chapter, I have sought to show that the novel interrogates the notion of choice in general, and especially when applied to reproduction. Finally, I will discuss how *Motherhood* cultivates its own form of "attentive love," as Sara Ruddick puts it, that raises new possibilities for feminist political practice.

Many reviewers who focused on the narrator's thoughts and feelings about having a child missed the novel's meditation on family history. This element of the novel complicates the "book or child" choice that the text seems to present. In one sense, it is true that the narrator decides to write a book rather than have a child; she often presents these actions as "either/or," and towards the end of the novel she "imagine[s] *not* racing to finish this book; not giving myself

only two more months with it, but ten months, or a year, or two years, or ten" (273). That is, she imagines writing without the deadline of a pregnancy. But the project of this novel is not to set motherhood and art in competition, but rather to show how motherhood structures even the lives of women who refuse it. In other words, while many of the novel's reviewers were frustrated by what Heti doesn't get about motherhood, I maintain that her book is appropriately titled—that she is examining (one aspect of) motherhood itself. Crucially, Heti recognizes that shifting thinking around motherhood requires viewing one's mother differently. In this way, she takes up the project that Irigaray claims is essential to feminism: defining motherhood from the perspective of women.

In keeping with the novel's engagement with magic, myth, the sacred, and the occult, the narrator avoids using a term like "depression" to describe her and her mother's bouts of sadness (even though in the course of the novel, the narrator goes on antidepressants to treat her cyclical mood swings).[39] She refers instead to her mother's and her own sadness, or "tears," as charged entities that move between mother and daughter. "My mother cried for forty days and forty nights," the narrator says, remarking that as a child she planned to "solve the problem of [her mother's] crying": "Then I grew unhappy, too. I grew filled up with tears" (15). The narration of this sadness, which is traced back to the narrator's maternal grandmother, a survivor of the Holocaust, takes on the quality of a fairy tale or myth. Narrating intergenerational sadness in this way gives the novel a flexibility that more clinical accounts of mental illness or trauma might

[39] In addition to the *I Ching*-derived practice of the coins and the talisman against bad dreams, the narrator is approached by a psychic on the street in New York and visits a tarot card reader in a small town (47-49, 141-150). The novel is also interested in Judaism; besides the reverberating effects of the Holocaust on the narrator's family, the narrator cites Jewish history and cultural production (157-158), and the Hebrew Bible story of Jacob wrestling the angel is a central metaphor of the novel, as I discuss later (58-62; 118-19; 284). Characteristically, the novel also links the sacred with the narrator's changeable body: "What to make of God's two faces, the all-accepting and loving New Testament Ovulating God, and the vindictive and rageful Old Testament PMS God? How to reconcile these two within my own body?" (107).

lack; rather than approaching mental illness as a problem to be solved with the help of medical experts, the narrator intervenes in the "tale" of this sadness with her own vital, flexible book. Moreover, this account of mothers and daughters redefines "motherhood" itself.

After the narrator learns from a psychic that the women in her family have been carrying a "curse," she reflects that the heterosexual nuclear family has not worked well for women so cursed:

> Someone cursed me, and my mother, and my mother's mother before me. . . . We do not pursue happiness in marriage. We do not look for happiness with children. We think mainly of our work, to solve the problem of our mothers' tears.
>
> My grandmother would not have wanted her daughter to be sad, and she would not have wanted her sadness to carry on through me. No one who has been through what she went through would have wanted her family to carry this sadness on. (198)

The narrator's relationship with her mother, who, like her father, immigrated to Canada from Hungary, has been a difficult one; as a child, she sensed that her mother disliked her. Her father did most of the work of raising her, to the extent that a childhood friend once asked the narrator if her mother was dead (74). At the same time, the narrator admires her mother's immersion in her work. While studying for medical school exams, the narrator's mother rents an apartment of her own for several months, and the narrator, then five, recalls going to see her: "I wanted to live in an apartment, too, with no one around to bother me. I loved to visit her there" (74).

The final sections of *Motherhood* perform a remarkable alchemy, transforming the narrator's angst over the question of reproduction into a reassessed relationship with her own mother. Without an obvious inclination toward caring for a child, Heti's narrator decides to address motherhood through her own mother. By turning her attention to her mother rather than

having her own child, she thus interrupts the failure of recognition between mothers and daughters that Irigaray points to as one of the effects of patriarchy.

Irigaray describes this missed opportunity in the poetic essay, "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other," which reimagines the often-idealized act of breastfeeding as something that keeps mother and daughter from knowing each other. Irigaray is clear that it isn't the biological facts of motherhood, but rather its organization under patriarchy, that makes it oppressive: the daughter, who narrates the essay, says, "if you lead me back again and again to this blind assimilation of you—but who are you?—if you turn your face from me, giving yourself to me only in an already inanimate form . . . I'll turn to my father. I'll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you" ("One Doesn't Stir" 62). The question, "but who are you?" indicates that mothers and daughters cannot know each other when motherhood is made distinct from womanhood: the mother becomes a background from which to separate; the daughter cannot see her as a woman. Irigaray claims, "Woman has no reason to envy the penis or the phallus. But the non-establishment of the sexual identity of both sexes [*sexes*] results in the fact that man, the people of men, has transformed his penis [*sexe*] into an instrument of power so as to dominate maternal power" ("Bodily Encounter" 42). The result of this, in "And the One Doesn't Stir," is that even nourishment registers as a void, as I discussed in the introduction: "When you poured yourself into me, you'd already left. . . . I received from you only your obliviousness of self, while my presence allowed you to forget this oblivion. So that with my tangible appearance I redoubled the lack of your presence" (65). Under a symbolic system that conceives woman's sexuality as lack, mother and daughter exchange that lack between them. Where there might be a feminist alliance between mothers and daughters, there is instead silence.

Motherhood both playfully cites Freud's idea that a baby might be a penis-substitute and illustrates the way in which patriarchal definitions of motherhood circumscribe women's lives. The narrator describes to a friend her sense that "it would be so easy to have Miles's baby—his flesh inside mine, his skin so nicely scented, so clean, so smooth; that brain, that heart, mixed with mine. When I described this to Erica, she said, *You're not describing wanting his child in you. You're describing wanting his cock*" (101). The narrator reflects, "A child is not more of him. A child is not your boyfriend" (102). The novel attempts to describe "maternal power" from the perspective of women, as Irigaray calls for—maternal power without the phallus. Heti recognizes that reimagining this power has implications for all women, mothers or not, as Irigaray claims. The narrator reflects that "a woman will always be made to feel like a criminal, whatever choice she makes, however hard she tries. Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do, too" (44). In her discussion of her own mother's experience, the narrator emphasizes that choices do not lead to liberation, whether it's the choice to have a child or not, or a choice about mothering itself. For example, the novel makes clear that even mothers who refuse to immerse themselves in the care of their children, like the narrator's mother, are trapped by the patriarchal definition of motherhood that Irigaray describes in "One Doesn't Stir." While the narrator's father chaperones field trips, drives the narrator to after-school activities, and comes home from work early, her mother works outside of the home. But this work is not legible to the childhood friend who wonders if her mother is dead. Recovering the identity of the mother *as woman* is the task to which Heti turns in the last part of *Motherhood*.

First, the narrator outlines a mode of honoring her foremothers without passing on their genes: "When I think about everything that could or couldn't be, I think I don't want our flesh—my mother's flesh, my grandmother's flesh—to just be divided and replicated. I want their life to

be counted" (199). The narrator imagines the book she is writing to help achieve this, as "a creature that lives inside many bodies." She reflects further, "Maybe motherhood means honoring one's mother. Many people do that by becoming mothers. . . . I am also honoring my mother. . . . What's the difference between being a good mother and being a good daughter? Practically a lot, but symbolically nothing at all" (200). The novel constructs a relationship between mother and daughter that is *symbolic* in that it reconsiders how these two women may understand each other's desires and power beyond what appears given by the "natural," familial relationship. A traditional narrative of the nuclear family would understand Heti's narrator and her mother in terms of insufficiency or lack: the mother, who didn't much want to be a mother, failed her daughter, son, and husband when she focused instead on her work. Instead of having her own child, the narrator understands "motherhood" for her to mean "being a good daughter," that is, reconsidering her relationship with her mother to highlight the ways she respects and admires her. In this way, the novel intervenes significantly in the powerlessness that Irigaray describes as characteristic of mother-daughter relationships.

Strikingly, the narrator also mentions that her parents, now divorced, "are sort of like brother and sister—for family is scarce in our family" (75). This repurposing of the nuclear family—husband and wife become like siblings, daughter becomes "mother" by honoring her own mother—articulates a sense of freedom developed not through the assertion of an independent self against the family, but rather through the creative transformation of family relationships. Toward the beginning of the novel, the narrator remarks, "My mother often says, *You are free*" (15). We may read the novel as the narrator's attempt to understand the nature of this freedom. From her mother's perspective, perhaps, the narrator is free from the burden of motherhood or marriage, or rather free *to* marry and have a child, or free from the hardships of

poverty and immigration. Heti's novel makes clear that this freedom is *not* the freedom to choose whether to have a child, but rather the freedom to cultivate a feminist imaginary based around possibility and indeterminacy that could unite mothers and non-mothers.

At the beginning of the novel, Heti's narrator reflects on the kind of alchemy she wishes to effect: "The philosophers wanted to turn dark matter into gold, and I want to turn my mother's sadness into gold" (16). The novel turns the narrator's and her mother's sadness into gold in two ways: by lingering over the question of reproduction in a way that complicates this "choice," and by revisiting her relationship with her mother in order to foreground her mother's womanhood. In both aims, Heti points to "attention" as an aesthetic-moral capacity. The narrator asks, "Is attention soul? If I pay attention to my mother's sorrow, does that give it soul?" (16). Furthermore, by rigorously and flexibly observing her own thoughts and feelings, even the ones that return painfully and cyclically (as in PMS), Heti's narrator refuses to accept the choice presented to her. Rather, she creates a new terrain of action which imagines not having a child as a creative act which might reverberate outward to a feminist redefinition of women's sexuality and maternity. The narrator considers that

> If I consider raising a child in my own home and say this is what I have chosen *not* to do, what have I chosen, if anything? Language doesn't fit around this experience. It is therefore not an experience we can speak of. But I want a word that is utterly independent of the task of child-rearing, with which to think about this decision—a word about what *is*, and not what is not. (159)

By pointing to the double-bind that catches women around the issue of reproduction, making them feel like "criminals" no matter what they choose, the novel demonstrates that mothers and non-mothers share an interest in redefining womanhood outside of the framework of choice. One

part of this is finding language to describe being a woman without children. Though the narrator says that she wants a word that is not associated with childcare, I would suggest that the second part of her characterization, about finding a positive rather than a negative term, is ultimately more important.

Is it possible, then, that the word she finds is "motherhood"? The novel ends with the sentence (set on a page by itself), "Then I named this wrestling place Motherhood, for here is where I saw God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared" (284). Earlier in the novel, the narrator recounts the Hebrew Bible story of Jacob, who wrestles with God, in the form of an angel, until God grants him a blessing. She relates this story to her relationship to writing and reproduction, asking the coins if "the idea of being a mother" is "a taboo for [her]" and if she "must . . . synthesize this taboo with [her] life by telling a story about wrestling with it" (118). She also asks, "what does it mean to be blessed? . . . That our wrestling will take care of us forever?"; the coins answer "*yes*" (119). It is not the choice that leads to liberation, but rather wrestling with the question "forever." For Heti, "motherhood" is a practice of writing that emphasizes possibility and flexibility and that finally enables her to see her own mother as a woman. For women faced with a set of choices about motherhood, any of which points to women's deficiency, Heti's construction of not-motherhood as an action rather than the lack of one, her generation of language around the thing ("motherhood") that women go through whether or not they have children, is a radical act.

The Reality of Non-Sovereignty

Heti's and Cusk's writing insists that "motherhood" generates a form of freedom not tied to choice or sovereignty. This freedom, moreover, is theorized through the imaginative work of

writing, which creates an artistic reality that contests the hegemonic reality of patriarchy. For Heti, the way through "motherhood" is a practice of writing that emphasizes chance and possibility and that proceeds from a dynamic, reproductive (but not necessarily reproducing) body. In Cusk's novels, too, the writer contests a reality, structured by sovereignty, that ignores care.

In *Kudos*, a writer who has translated Faye's books describes how her ex-husband terrorized her after their separation, kidnapping their daughter for ten days. The writer, Felícia, insists that her ex-husband's "theft" of the child "was a show of strength and a way of proving his power to me, that he could take her away and bring her back when he chose to":

> If we had fought physically . . . he would likewise have won, and this is what he was making clear to me by removing the child at will, that if I thought I had power—even if only the old power of the mother—I was completely mistaken. I had not, moreover, found freedom by leaving him: in fact what I had done was forfeit all my rights, which he had only extended to me in the first place, and made myself his slave. There is a passage in one of your books . . . where you describe enduring something similar, and I translated it very carefully and with great caution, as if it were something fragile that I might mistakenly break or kill, because these experiences do not fully belong to reality and the evidence for them is a matter of one person's word against another's. . . . afterwards I felt that while you had legitimised this half-reality by writing about it, I had legitimised it again by managing to transpose it into another language and ensuring its survival. (223-24)

Felícia's reference to "the old power of the mother" recalls Cusk's claim, in her review of Rebecca Asher's book, that "while the old idea of woman had certainly been done away with, no

one had thought to put anything in its place" ("Shattered"). In a patriarchal reality masquerading as gender equality, mothers are "free" to leave their husbands, but what kind of freedom is this if they cannot care for their children? Felícia's claim that her husband "had only extended" her rights to her "in the first place" points to the fact that when freedom is linked to sovereignty, as it is in civil society, such rights are not useful to women. Running just under this discourse of "rights" is a more primitive system of power by brute force. Might the passage suggest that legal rights, ostensibly meant to displace power by force, can only defer it slightly (if not reinscribe it) when relations of care do not structure public life?

The "half-reality" that Faye writes about and that Felícia translates is the missing reality, the feminist reality generated by care rather than by rights bestowed by men. By paying attention to the question of reproduction, the feminist writers in Heti's and Cusk's books articulate a vision of freedom *through* compulsion. These experiences of compulsion include the mother's feeling, as described by Cusk and discussed in the introduction, that "when she is with [her children] she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself" (*Life's Work* 7) as well as the so-called "choice" to have a child or not. As I suggested earlier, this feminist freedom, while generated from women's experiences, describes reality for everyone. Interdependency defines life, and liberation happens not by seeking an impossible sovereignty, but by acknowledging the ways in which we shape each other and the world.

Chapter 4

Transformation, Pleasure, and Care

In this chapter, I track concepts of transformation in the novel *Wild Seed* by Octavia Butler (1980) and *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson's 2015 work of "autotheory." *Wild Seed*, the prequel to Butler's *Patternist* series, tells the story of a woman, Anyanwu, who has lived for hundreds of years, who has the power to heal herself and others, and who can transform her body into other shapes, including those of animals. When the novel begins, in Africa in 1690, Anyanwu becomes involved with a being, Doro, who gathers and breeds people with extraordinary psychic and sensory abilities. Doro cannot die, and he no longer has a body of his own; he takes the bodies of other people, killing them in the process. Doro and Anyanwu are both African, and the book spans almost two hundred years of the transatlantic slave trade, in which Doro participates (though he is only interested in purchasing slaves with abilities that will be useful to his project). *The Argonauts* integrates cultural theory, especially queer and feminist, into an account of Nelson's relationship with her partner, Harry, including Nelson's pregnancy and Harry's gender transition. Like *Wild Seed*, *The Argonauts* is interested in the mother's pleasure: both sexual pleasure and the pleasure taken in care. The book discusses the importance of paying attention to embodied-sensory experience, both because this attention is pleasurable, and because this attention leads to transformed experiences of care.

Though these books are generically and stylistically quite different, reading them together demonstrates how visions of embodied transformation provide a useful way of thinking about pleasure in motherhood. I consider the stakes in Butler's present for thinking about black women's pleasure, including sexual pleasure, through a transforming body. While *Wild Seed*

suggests how pleasure leads to social transformation, I argue that the form and style of *The Argonauts* prevent a social meaning of pleasure from emerging. I return to texts considered in earlier chapters, particularly *The Undying*, which, like *The Argonauts*, is a memoir, to show how form and style work politically. Finally, I connect the question of sensory transformation to that of literary form. Considering the relationship between form and politics is especially important, I argue, for a topic as ordinary and yet fraught as motherhood.

Embodied Transformations and Pleasure

In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu's pleasure in paying attention to her body and the natural world leads to a technology of healing that allows her community to thrive. She transforms her body into other (human and animal) shapes for strategic reasons, but also because these transformations please her. Anyanwu's awareness of her body leads to the cultivation of new senses and to a healing practice that structures social life. That is, following her pleasure, Anyanwu is a healer. The novel insists that the compromised nature of Anyanwu's relation to Doro, both in her mortality and her identity as a mother—he wields power by threatening her children—is still a kind of freedom.

Wild Seed suggests that approaching the body with curiosity and discipline, as Anyanwu does, yields a transformed understanding of that body. The implications for this kind of curiosity, as I see it, are quite stark. *Wild Seed* refuses mind-body dualism and represents the body as intertwined with the world, concepts which, though common in feminist theory and science studies since the 1970s, have taken a while to permeate some of the fields in which they are most urgently needed. Despite advancements in research, imaging, modeling, and diagnostics, Western medicine has been slow to perceive connections between different body systems

because of the long shadow cast by an outdated, mechanistic body model.[40] To take one example: the gut-brain connection and its related concept of the microbiome likely have been so slow to register in mainstream medicine precisely *because* they refuse any separation between, one, the "mind" and the presumably brute processes of digestion, and two, the body and its environment. As a collection of organisms within the human digestive system, whose disruption (by pesticides, GMOs, and antibiotics) may lead to a host of health problems in virtually every body system (heart disease, cancer, asthma, depression), the microbiome threatens notions of a human organism as bounded and singular. [41] A standpoint feminist might argue that a masculinist worldview, emphasizing independence and bodily integrity, made the microbiome invisible; as Sandra Harding writes, summarizing standpoint theory, "Political struggle and feminist theory . . . must be incorporated into the sciences if we are to be able to see beneath the partial and false images of the world that the sciences generate" (48). More recently, Evelyn Fox Keller has pointed out that new scientific metaphors would make new knowledge possible. She argues that, since advancements in genome science have revealed the human genome to be "far more like an exquisitely sensitive reactive system" than "a set of genes" that determine morphology, "the bifurcation of developmental influences into the categories of genetic and environmental makes no sense. Similarly, if we understand the term environment as including cultural dynamics, neither does the division of biological from cultural factors" (265). The biology-culture divide, assumed by many scientists to be a coherent one, precludes certain insights. Keller's analysis highlights how, when science fails to renew its metaphors, it misses what is in the world.

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[40] I understand that "Western medicine" is not a unified entity; I am pointing here to trends, research and funding patterns, and systems of belief that reinforce each other to produce a culture of medicine, which is differentiated by specialty and, of course, by the culture in which it is situated.

[41] Discussions of the microbiome and gut-brain connection have proliferated recently, with several books for both popular and medical readerships published in the last five years (see, for example, Anderson et. al., Hyland and Stanton, E. Mayer, and Naidoo; Zack Bush has also gained visibility as a public speaker and medical consultant).

Moreover, the work of scientists who *have* been paying attention differently often does not filter into the medical worldview and practical advice given by a doctor. As a result, many people with chronic illness, especially illness that is poorly understood, find that healers on the "fringes" of the medical establishment—naturopaths, acupuncturists, herbalists, bodyworkers—have developed a greater knowledge of certain ailments, or clusters of ailments, than many medical doctors. I am arguing, as I did in my reading of Rachel Cusk's novels, that *paying attention differently* is required now in order to develop capacities of care that respond to present conditions. My reading of *Wild Seed* considers how a curious, transforming attention to the body follows from the vulnerable pleasure of motherhood; that is, how the kind of attention that mothers embody might teach us how to see the world.

In addition to following embodied pleasure in both texts, I track how the concept of transformation stands as an alternative to more teleological ways of figuring change, like transition, transit, or transcendence. In *The Argonauts*, for example, Harry explains his dissatisfaction with the term "trans": "*I'm not on my way anywhere*" (53). Nelson reflects, "How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?" (53). In *Wild Seed*, too, transformation resists resolution, particularly the resolution of transcendence. As Anyanwu says to Doro about her body, "you have not understood how completely that one body can change. I cannot leave it as you can, but I can make it over" (233). In contrast to Doro, who goes through bodies and leaves them, Anyanwu has only one body. The narrative suggests that Doro's bodilessness makes him cruel, focused above all on maximizing value from the people and bodies he collects. He epitomizes, perhaps, the kind of posthumanism that Katherine Hayles critiques, as I discussed in chapter 1, which figures the body as prosthesis and the mind as the site of identity (3-4). Anyanwu's embodiment, on the other hand, generates an ethic of care

driven by physical transformation. In both texts, the embodied experience of pregnancy and motherhood makes possible a new way of thinking about transformation. The pregnant or maternal body is both limited and transforming; in having certain responsibilities, in losing certain capacities but gaining others, this body creates a new form of care. *Wild Seed* and *The Argonauts* thus suggest that transformation (as opposed to progress or transcendence) happens within limits but might lead to new ways of being. These texts are situated in a long feminist critique of narratives of transcendence: for example, the belief in objectivity that Donna Haraway describes as a fantasy of disembodiment, "the view from above, from nowhere" ("Situated" 195). Crucially, too, transformation holds open possibilities. As opposed to the kind of gender "transition" that Harry claims does not describe him, the outcome of a transformation is not known in advance. The transformations in these texts are therefore vulnerable, just as the body is vulnerable.

Embodiment in *Wild Seed*

Anyanwu's ethic of care, to conserve what exists by expanding her capacities of body-knowledge, proceeds from pleasure and curiosity. This ethic of care makes Anyanwu vulnerable, in a sense, since her concern for her children gives Doro more power over her, preventing her from fleeing for many years. But Anyanwu's care for and mothering of the people Doro breeds leads to the cultivation of new senses and is a kind of freedom, which is, however, always compromised. Therefore, in my reading of *Wild Seed*, I linger on embodiment itself before moving to a discussion of motherhood in order to show how limitation and abundance come together in Anyanwu's body *and* in her experience of mothering.

The novel envisions a form of embodiment that is self-transforming *and* fundamentally dependent, and therefore free in Elizabeth Grosz's sense of exhibiting "a freedom of action that is above all connected to an active self, an embodied being, a being who acts in a world of other beings and objects" ("Feminism" 147). Grosz proposes that Henri Bergson's action-focused, intersubjective concept of freedom might be useful for constructing a theory of feminist subjectivity. For both Bergson and Grosz, transformation is central to freedom. Pointing out that "[b]oth libertarians and determinists share the belief that the subject is the same subject, the same entity, before and after the alternatives have been posed and one chosen," Grosz notes that Bergson focuses not on whether a subject is free, but rather on whether an act is free (144). Considering freedom as a quality of a person makes no sense when people are always transforming, and therefore are never identical with themselves. As a woman with a tremendous amount of power and autonomy, Anyanwu struggles to adapt to the restrictions that Doro places on her. At times, she considers herself to be like "a slave" (140). But Anyanwu's compromised care generates new forms of life, as she cares for and educates people about their (sometimes painful) psychic and sensory abilities and provides medical care before the advent of modern medicine. Because the novel situates Anyanwu's struggle against and with Doro on a cosmic scale, her freedom changes the nature of reality itself. Her embodied, self-transforming existence transforms reality, in the way that Grosz describes in her reading of Bergson's vitalism: "Life opens the universe to becoming more than it is" ("Feminism" 150).

In addition to considering how the tension between Anyanwu's freedom and unfreedom relates to sexual pleasure and motherhood, this chapter considers how Anyanwu's body makes meaning socially. Anyanwu's body is an exemplary site for thinking through the deadlock noted by Grosz between "social constructionism" and "biologism," both misapprehensions of the body

(*Volatile* 23). Grosz argues that "[t]he body is neither—while also being both—the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined" (23). Rethinking the body has immense stakes for social life, as Grosz points out:

> to develop a philosophy which refuses to privilege mind at the expense of body would, as Nietzsche discovered, completely change the character of the philosophical enterprise; and presumably the same would be true of all other knowledges insofar as the body is the disavowed condition of them all. . . . the body provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other . . . (*Volatile* 20)

Anyanwu's body makes manifest the flexibility and in-betweenness of the human body. Her body is self-knowing; it learns how to transform both in order to heal (that is, conserve) itself and to expand its capacities. Put slightly differently, "embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it" (Hayles xiv). Anyanwu's body responds to the cultures she lives through and also shapes these cultures. In her discussion of Freud, Grosz argues that while psychoanalysis is ultimately limited because it fails to recognize its context and position as patriarchal and masculine, it offers the useful insight that the body is "inscribed . . . by desire and signification, at the anatomical, physiological, and neurological levels," which "implies that the body which it presumes and helps to explain is an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it" (*Volatile* 60-61).

Butler literalizes this claim that attention to culture and oneself could yield a different body, one better suited to both survival and pleasure. At the same time, she emphasizes the limitations of living under power. Anyanwu can change and heal her body, sharpen her senses and increase her physical strength, but she can also die. She is not immortal, and once Doro finds her, she is not fully free. But her tethering to Doro, whose cold killing causes her so much suffering, is necessary, the novel seems to suggest. Anyanwu eventually teaches Doro how to feel; at the novel's climax, Doro weeps after centuries of being incapable of empathy. Over their two hundred years together, Anyanwu's feminist embodiment tempers and indeed transforms Doro's bodiless cruelty. We may think of this as a dramatization of traditional dualist conceptions of the body as feminine and the mind as masculine, as Grosz describes, which "leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women's bodies and services" (*Volatile* 14). Indeed, Doro not only lives in other people's bodies, but also collects people for breeding and kills them if they are disobedient or no longer useful. Anyanwu is valuable to Doro, furthermore, for her power to heal others.

The novel sets up and then complicates this gendered opposition. Yes, Anyanwu is embodied while Doro is bodiless, but Anyanwu's body is not inert or passive, nor is it precisely visible, the way bodies are thought to be. Anyanwu's "true shape" (233), a youthful female body, is not always the form she appears in. Because she repairs her body constantly, she doesn't age as the people around her do, so she takes the form of an old woman in her home village so as not to arouse suspicion. After she joins Doro and is surrounded by other people with special powers, she is freer to appear as she is, but she transforms when it makes sense to do so. For example,

when she establishes her own household in the American south in the 19th century, she takes the form of a property-owner (a white man). She also transforms for pleasure, as I will discuss later. Similarly, though Doro seems to be a kind of spirit without a body of his own, his son Isaac says that Doro "isn't flesh himself—nor spirit" (137). That Doro might be something more variable than an utterly self-contained mind is borne out by the novel's ending, when he finally admits to needing Anyanwu: not her "body" (bodies are, for most of the novel, more or less interchangeable to him) but her being. In this way, both Anyanwu's super-powered body and Doro's "pure mind" complicate rather than reify the mind-body divide.

Though she has lived for hundreds of years, Anyanwu is mortal; death is always a possibility.[42] Her continued survival depends on her knowledge of her body and her ability to respond to injury and illness. Anyanwu's ethic of care is linked to transformation in another way, too. In order to care for those around her, she must make tremendous compromises with Doro. At times, Anyanwu registers these compromises as "cowardice" (140); for example, when Doro, whom she considers her husband, forces her to marry his son, she says, "I have not the courage to die. I had never thought before that I was a coward, but I am. Living has become too precious a habit" (141). Anyanwu also reflects in this moment that she is "a slave" to Doro. Significantly, the terms "master" and "slave" also structure Doro and Anyanwu's first meeting. Seeking a lost group of his people and thinking that they might be related to Anyanwu, he asks her about her ancestors. She relates that they were once slaves, but they crossed a river "to become free people, our own masters" (9). However, they displaced and enslaved the people living in the land where

[42] Anyanwu's mortality is lost on some critics, presumably because she and Doro live together for centuries and will live, the novel's ending suggests, for centuries more. Julian Lucas notes that Anyanwu is "the first fellow-immortal" that Doro meets (76). But Anyanwu "could be killed as easily as anyone else if her body was damaged in some way she could not understand quickly enough to repair" (Butler 59). The tension *between* Anyanwu's mortality and Doro's immortality is crucial to understanding the novel's vision of embodiment, vulnerability, and care.

they settled. In defense of this history, Anyanwu "woodenly" repeats the saying of a long-ago husband, "It is better to be a master than to be a slave" (9). While she considers that slavery is a part of her culture ("That was the way it had always been"), "her own experience had taught her to hate slavery" (9). This experience includes not only having been a slave twice but also having been a wife. Though she enjoys relationships with men, she has recently abstained from marriage "because of the way a woman must bow her head and be subject to her husband" (10). Anyanwu reflects on all this in her first meeting with Doro:

> It was better to be as she was—a priestess who spoke with the voice of a god and was feared and obeyed. But what was that? She had become a kind of master herself.
>
> "Sometimes, one must become a master to avoid becoming a slave," she said softly.
>
> "Yes," he agreed. (10)

Anyanwu's strategic submission to Doro, which both allows her to survive and protects her children, is part of a psychic transformation through which Anyanwu learns how to be powerful without being a "master." This strategic submission, or "cowardice," makes survival possible for herself and the people around her. In other words, the limits and possibilities of Anyanwu's body, and specifically the experience of motherhood, teach Anyanwu to be powerful without becoming an oppressor. In turn, she guides Doro to a similar awareness.

Anyanwu's Technology of Healing

Butler's novels frequently meditate on sensory experience and its relationship to consciousness, identity, and action. In *Fledgling* (2005), vampires and the human "symbionts" off of whom they feed exist in a partially-willed, partially-compelled relation; the vampires, called Ina, are powerfully driven by smell and hunger, while a chemical in the Ina's saliva alters

their symbionts' biology and emotions to make them want their vampires. *Fledgling* points to a paradox around discussions of the senses: on one hand, they are set in opposition to a sober, rational understanding of one's self and relationships, as when a symbiont asks an Ina, "Do you love me . . . or do I just taste good?" (139). On the other hand, our senses are how we make sense of the world at all. Ultimately, the novel refuses to separate sensory experience from knowing and feeling and suggests that the threat to autonomy posed by overwhelming experiences of the senses need not doom political projects of community.

In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu's healing practice, emerging from a profound awareness of her body, works to develop a new understanding of the mind-body.[43] Anyanwu's knowledge of the world proceeds from her body, and knowing her body generates an ethic of care that shapes her community. Anyanwu learns about her body, furthermore, as things happen to it, like injury and illness—as she is affected by the world. In this sense, she exemplifies the kind of embodied knowledge that Bruno Latour describes in his distinction between "articulations" and "statements" in science. Whereas statements are limited to "accuracy," articulations "may easily proliferate without ceasing to register differences" (211). Latour describes a persistent dualism that makes it difficult to talk about the body, which tends to assume

> a world made up of a substrate of *primary qualities*—what science sees but that the average human misses—on top of which subjects have simply added mere *secondary qualities* that exist only in our minds, imaginations and cultural accounts. In the course of

[43] Discussing the challenge of resisting dualistic accounts of the mind and body, Grosz points out that "within our intellectual heritage there is no language in which to describe such concepts, no terminology that does not succumb to versions of this polarization" (*Volatile* 21-22). Indeed, the phrases Grosz offers, "*embodied subjectivity*" and "*psychical corporeality*" do not escape this dualism; that's her point. While the dichotomy lingers, too, in "mind-body," used as a noun, this term at least attempts to suggest that these "entities" are in fact inseparable. Margaret Price uses the term "bodymind" "to mark the fact that … mental disability matters" in a field often focused on physical disability, but notes that when she began using this term, "I hadn't really moved anywhere with the problem that *body* and *mind* tend to be treated as rhetorically distinct; my use of *bodymind* was simply a marker" (269).

> this operation, *the interesting body will have disappeared* . . . Either we have the world, the science, the things and no subjects, or we have the subject and not the world, what things really are. (208)

Latour proposes that in order to avoid this trap, we define "the body as 'learning to be affected'" (209), which is compatible with a science composed of articulations rather than statements. Thinking in terms of articulations requires a non-dualist conception of the body.

Using the example of a scents kit that trains "noses" for the perfume industry, Latour suggests that we think of such training not as allowing a person to detect something outside them, in the world, but rather as changing the body itself: "body parts are progressively acquired at the same time as 'world counter-parts' are being registered in a new way. Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium *and* a sensitive world" (207). Along these lines, "an articulate subject is someone who learns to be affected by others—*not by itself*" (210). Latour's concept of the articulate subject illuminates Anyanwu's relation to her body and the world; her extraordinary ability to not only know but transform her body through awareness and study takes to an extreme Latour's description of world-awareness as "acquiring a body." Ideally, says Latour, science would be composed of "articulated propositions" rather than "statements"; whereas articulated propositions expand the world as they proliferate, statements are engaged in an impossible attempt to "say the thing *itself*" (212). Knowledge projects should be aimed at an expansive description which produces difference, rather than at the unattainable goal of producing definitive models that are identical with the things they describe.

Two passages describing healings in *Wild Seed* demonstrate different possible interpretations of Anyanwu's healing power. The first healing, narrated from Doro's perspective,

suggests a model of the healer as master, while the second, narrated from Anyanwu's perspective, makes clear that Anyanwu's healing power requires constant recalibration and vulnerability. As Anyanwu and Doro travel across Africa to the coast, where they will board a ship to the American colonies, a cut on Doro's hand becomes infected and the infection spreads, causing Doro to consider "how he would get a new body without endangering her" (30). Anyanwu bites Doro's hand and it seems, to Doro, that "she did nothing. Her attention seemed to turn inward, and she did not answer when he spoke to her" (31). After this meditation, Anyanwu again puts his hand in her mouth, "caress[ing] the wound with her tongue," waiting, and giving the wound more of her saliva, which "burned like fire" (31). The infected hand begins to heal, and Anyanwu explains what she has done: "There were living things in your hand that should not have been there . . . Living things too small to see. I have no name for them, but I can feel them and know them when I take them into my body. As soon as I know them, I can kill them within myself. I gave you a little of my body's weapon against them" (31). Hearing this, Doro reflects, "Tiny living things too small to see, but large enough to make him sick. If his wound had not begun to heal so quickly and cleanly, he would not have believed a word she said" (31). Though Doro has lived centuries longer than Anyanwu and is, in some ways, more powerful than she is, his understanding of the body—what we might call biology—doesn't appear to be any more advanced than the time he is in. A "tiny living thin[g] too small to see" is unbelievable to him, except that her medicine works.

Though it is tempting to understand Anyanwu as possessing the "real" or correct understanding of biology—that infection is caused by bacteria, which must be treated by a kind of innate immune response or antibiotics—I suggest that we read her awareness not as identical with the 20th- or 21st-century reader's own, but rather as a mediation of discourses about the

immune system. In this, I follow Donna Haraway's argument that "the immune system is . . . a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics" ("Biopolitics" 204). The immune system, sited across "tissues and organs" and also "in the blood and lymph circulatory systems," is "everywhere and nowhere" (217-18). Furthermore, because "the immune system [is always] in a state of dynamic internal responding," it "makes a mockery of the notion of a constant genome even within 'one' body" (218). Haraway notes that popular discourse about the immune system frequently registers anxiety and confusion about the paradoxical implications of this system: the immune system's "extraordinary variations," which make it never identical with itself, "are the critical means of maintaining individual bodily coherence" (218). Thus, at the tail end of the Cold War and the beginning of the AIDS crisis, "[i]mages of the immune system as battlefield abound": "Immunity and invulnerability are intersecting concepts, a matter of consequence in a nuclear culture unable to accommodate the experience of death and finitude within available liberal discourse on the collective and personal individual" (224).

Haraway maintains, however, that the immune system might inspire us to think about bodies and cultures differently: "how can 'we,' late-twentieth-century Westerners, image our vulnerability as a window on to life?" (225). This is precisely what Anyanwu's healing practice accomplishes, as the next scene of healing makes clear. While Anyanwu's healing appears to Doro to be power over illness—and indeed, Anyanwu's use of the word "weapon" seems to support a narrative of "immune system as battlefield" (Haraway, "Biopolitics" 224)—the next scene, narrated from Anyanwu's perspective, complicates this understanding. The novel insists that we view Anyanwu's healing practice as a negotiation between self and other, an intricate process of learning how the (always vulnerable) body is situated in the world.

In the first section of the novel, Anyanwu and Doro travel to the American colonies on a ship with other Africans that Doro has recognized as possessing extraordinary abilities.[44] In the slave port before the voyage, Anyanwu encounters her grandson, who has been taken from his village by slave traders, and she persuades Doro to buy the boy. On the ship, Okoye and Anyanwu become seasick, and this scene provides the first close look at Anyanwu's healing process from her perspective:

> she went over her body carefully. She discovered that there was a wrongness, a kind of imbalance deep within her ears. It was a tiny disturbance, but she knew her body well enough to notice the smallest change. For a moment, she observed this change with interest. . . . She focused on her inner ears and remembered perfection there, remembered organs and fluids and pressures in balance, their wrongness righted. Remembering and correcting were one gesture . . . it had taken her much practice—and much pain—to learn such ease of control. Every change she made in her body had to be understood and visualized. If she was sick or injured, she could not simply wish to be well. . . . she had spent much of her long life learning the diseases, disorders, and injuries that she could suffer—learning them often by inflicting mild versions of them on herself, then slowly, painfully, by trial and error, coming to understand exactly what was wrong and how to impress healing. Thus, when her enemies came to kill her, she knew more about surviving than they did about killing. (59)

To get rid of seasickness, she must first "observ[e]" it "with interest"; Anyanwu's healing process starts with attention and curiosity. The quickness of her process belies the years of study

[44] This enterprise is organized within the infrastructure of the slave trade, as Doro has installed a loyal British slave trader in a West African port who combs through the enslaved people brought to him, looking for descendants of Doro's lost "seed village" (48). Once on the ship, the people purchased are not slaves, though they must obey Doro.

that have gone into it; while "[r]emembering and correcting [are] one gesture," this is only because she has done work ahead of time to understand how her inner ear functions. If Anyanwu could "simply wish to be well," her power would be closer to a kind of mastery of mind over body. But as this scene makes clear, Anyanwu's healing process is thoroughly materialist; the novel encourages us to understand it on the continuum of more familiar, modest practices of embodied transformation, like exercise. We can observe the effect of exercise on our muscles; Anyanwu's awareness is much more extensive, reaching complex, internal processes, but similarly grounded in attention to and modification of her body. Elsewhere in the novel, Anyanwu recalls that her abilities caused people to fear her: "she had been blamed several times for causing misfortune" and "had been fed poison in the test for witchcraft" (5). This passage might suggest, then, that witchcraft is, quite simply, body awareness and, crucially, the ability to remember other states (which can be so difficult when one is unwell). Anyanwu's ability to remember what inner-ear balance feels like when she is sick is a rare and useful imaginative ability.

Reading the Body from Within

Anyanwu's embodied transformations can be understood strategically—restoring health, changing appearance for some practical purpose—but they are also based in pleasure. (Of course, strategy and pleasure cannot always be easily separated; cultivating good health prevents death and leads to a more pleasurable life, etc.) A scene in which Anyanwu becomes a dolphin during the sea voyage to America epitomizes pleasure in transformation, and her explanation of the process suggests a reconfigured relationship between pleasure, embodiment, and knowledge.

While Anyanwu can change her shape into any form that she sees, she cannot *become* another animal without eating its flesh. As she eats a dolphin, "the flesh of the fish told her all she needed to know about the creature's physical structure . . . Just a small amount of raw flesh told her more than she had words to say. Within each bite, the creature told her its story clearly thousands of times" (86). This description suggests an immeasurable quantity of knowledge, more than can be conveyed in "words." Anyanwu tells Doro that these "flesh-messages" are "as clear and fine as those in your books," but she reflects that this is not a perfect comparison: "It seems that you could misunderstand your books . . . Other men made them. Other men can lie or make mistakes. But the flesh can only tell me what it is. It has no other story." Doro asks her how she "read[s]" flesh, and she says "My body reads it—reads everything" (87). In the evening after she has eaten the dolphin, Doro finds Anyanwu changing her arm into a flipper, laughing "like a child" (87).

This different way of reading, this body-reading of flesh-messages that gives Anyanwu so much pleasure, points towards an alternative economy of knowing. The process insists that knowledge comes from the body and that our understanding of the world must start in the body. There is nothing inherently wrong with books, but there is the possibility of "misunderstand[ing]," perhaps when the body is denied, when the subject's position is disavowed in the "god-trick": "the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway, "Situated" 195). Anyanwu's way of "reading" the world could be said to respond to what Haraway claims is the most essential question for feminists, which I also considered in chapter 3:

> how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful

> accounts of a "real" world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. ("Situated" 187)

As I discussed, Haraway is critical in this essay not only of epistemology that denies its positionality (bad science, for example), but also of cultural studies responses that are broadly (and dangerously) dismissive of science. As the seasickness healing demonstrates, Anyanwu knows her body systematically, through "trial and error" (59)—scientifically—yet all her knowledge comes from her body. Unlike the knowledge production that Doro has told Anyanwu about, in Anyanwu's body-reading "the flesh can only tell me what it is. It has no other story" (87). Of course, such a direct, unmediated perception of a being's essential nature has also been claimed by some of the most problematic scientific projects. What makes Anyanwu's knowledge non-harmful is her changeability and the pleasure she takes in transformation.

While most scenes in *Wild Seed* move the plot forward in a specific way, Anyanwu's sojourn with the dolphins marks a pause in the novel's web of human relations. Unlike a later moment when she becomes a bird to escape Doro, who cannot "track" her in animal form, this transformation serves no strategic purpose. Anyanwu becomes a dolphin because she is curious and wants to experience life as a dolphin, and she experiences this body with wonder and pleasure:

> She reveled in the strength and speed of her new body, and in its keen hearing . . . she could close her eyes and perceive an only slightly diminished world around her with her ears. She could make sounds and they would come back to her as echoes bearing with them the story of all that lay before her. . . . Her dolphin body was wonderfully agile. She

> seemed to fly through the air, plunging back smoothly and leaping again without strain or weariness. This was the best body she had ever shaped for herself. (90-91)

Taking pleasure in the world as a dolphin, with the specific embodied capacities of a dolphin, gives Anyanwu a different kind of knowledge. Though her transformation is complete at the beginning of this scene, we might say that she *acquires* the dolphin's body as she uses her senses and learns how to jump like a dolphin. Anyanwu's engagement with the underwater world, through echolocation, for example, brings her dolphin body into being, in the sense that Latour describes.

Besides hearing, Anyanwu also experiences an enriched sense of touch as a dolphin. Surrounded by dolphins, she recognizes the touch of a particular male dolphin who courts her: "She performed a kind of dance with the male, moving and touching, certain that no human ceremony had every drawn her in so quickly. She felt both eager and restrained, both willing and hesitant. She would accept him, had already accepted him" (92). Anyanwu has sex several times in the novel (in human form), but these occasions are referred to more than described. For example, Doro and Anyanwu's first sex is narrated after the fact: "during the night, she had managed to exhaust his strong young body with lovemaking" (25). And later in the novel: "He took her to the sofa, finally, undressed her, made love to her. She found that she did not mind particularly" (270). The dolphin scene is exceptional for how it follows Anyanwu's affective-sensory interest in real time. Her interest is in the male dolphin pursuing her, but also in the act of courting itself, the "dance." Anyanwu finds that "[d]olphin skin . . . was pleasantly sensitive," and so when she describes the mating ritual of "moving and touching," the reader imagines an intense, engaging, and yet, in some sense, *unimaginable* haptic experience. It is close enough to

human experiences of touch and/or sexual attraction that we can partially imagine it, but, since we are not dolphins, it opens onto an unknown.

This courting gets interrupted before the mating can occur; Doro's son, Isaac, who can fly, floats into the water to tell Anyanwu that Doro wants her to return to the ship. Anyanwu reflects that "[t]he mating would have been good" (93). This experience, though interrupted, resonates through the narrative as a kind of touchstone of expanded possibilities of pleasure. Crucially, it also challenges Anyanwu's prejudices about sex and embodiment; while she is hundreds of years old at the novel's start and has developed capacities that defy notions about any "natural" limits of the human body, she remains opposed to certain "abominations." For example, when Doro proposes to Anyanwu that they have switched-gender sex, he in the body of a woman and she as a man, she objects that this would be "a vile thing," "an abomination" (109). It is also an "abomination," according to Anyanwu, for her to marry her "husband's" son, Isaac, and for people to drink animal milk (129, 127). It seems strange for a woman with such a range of embodied—and thus sensory and, in turn, emotional—experiences available to her to retain such strong, culturally-specific aversions. But Anyanwu's thinking changes through the novel: in the end, for example, Isaac is "the best of all her husbands" (212), certainly better than Doro, to whom she initially claimed fidelity.

Along similar lines, when the male dolphin approaches her, she notes that "[s]he had avoided animal matings in the past. She was a woman. Intercourse with an animal was abomination. But now . . . it was as though the dolphins were not animals" (92). Another way of saying this might be: Anyanwu's experience of "acquiring" a dolphin body as she inhabits her dolphin senses and capacities has expanded her own identity from "woman" to something more capacious. From this expanded perspective, dolphins are not *other* ("animals"). Later in the

novel, Anyanwu tells Doro that she again became a dolphin during the years spent hiding from him and that she "bore dolphin young—and they were dolphins. . . . They were the young of the dolphin Isaac caught and fed to us so long ago. My body was a copy of hers down to the smallest living part. There are no words for me to tell you how deep and complete such a change is" (234). When Anyanwu becomes an animal now, she tells Doro, she transforms more fully than earlier in her life, when she met Doro. Later, she reflects that she had transformed into a dolphin "first to confuse and evade Doro, then to get wealth and buy land, and finally because she enjoyed it" (265). (Anyanwu pays for the house she buys after her escape with gold found at the bottom of the ocean.)

Why would Butler, writing in 1980, describe her black female protagonist's sexuality most vividly and compellingly in non-human form? Though Anyanwu transforms often, she considers herself to have a "true shape": that of a young, African woman. I argue that Butler's portrayal of Anyanwu's pleasure responds to the set of conditions described by Hortense Spillers in her 1984 essay, "Interstices." Considering the proliferation of discourse on sexuality, particularly among academic feminists, Spillers argues that the legacy of slavery continues to make black women absent from this discourse. Under slavery, the black woman "became . . . the principal point of passage between the human and the nonhuman world"; as a result, "black is vestibular to culture" (76). This excision continues into Spillers's (and Butler's) present in the form of a silence around black women's sexuality, leading Spillers to conclude that "sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered . . . [t]he discourse of sexuality seems another way, in its present practices, that the world divides decisively between the haves/have-nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who, by choice or the accident of birth, benefit from the dominative mode, and those who do not" (78-79). Spillers cites Judy Chicago's art

installation, *The Dinner Party*, which features sculpted and painted porcelain plates for notable women, each one containing a different variation on a vulva—except for Sojourner Truth's, which features faces instead of genitalia. Spillers concludes that Truth "is merged here with a notion of sexual neutrality whose features, because they have not yet been defined, could assume any form, or none at all—in either case, the absence of articulation" (78). Spillers argues that as feminist theory has, in the 1970s and 80s, acquired "a logological dimension, or words that talk about other words" (88), it is especially important to recognize and amend the fact that accounts of black women's lives are not part of this discourse. Black women lack both "first-order" and "second-order naming"—straightforward accounts of experience, and commentary on the first-order, respectively—in feminist theory (89).

Spillers touches upon Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1* briefly, and "Interstices" might be understood, in part, as a response to this text. Foucault describes the trick by which the discourse of sexuality appears to describe something that already exists (sex), when in fact sexuality *creates* sex in order to manage populations and produce a sex-based subjectivity. While sex seems to be "an autonomous agency which secondarily produces manifold effects of sexuality over the entire length of its surface of contact with power," it is actually "an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality" (155). Thus, contrary to a common understanding that sex was increasingly repressed or censored beginning in the 17th century, Foucault demonstrates that sexuality was rather increasingly discussed (if in coded ways), so that by the 19th century, European society "put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning [sex] . . . As if it suspected sex of harboring a fundamental secret" (69). The result is that "we demand that sex speak the truth . . . and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our

immediate consciousness" (69). According to Foucault, there is no secret, no essential subjectivity that waits to be uncovered, and he looks forward to "a different economy of bodies and pleasures" based upon something other than "sex-desire" (159, 157).

Along similar lines, Spillers insists that black women's sexuality must be theorized, not in order to enter into the discourse described by Foucault, but in order to reconfigure it completely. Because black women have been excluded from feminist discourse at the same time that they have had significant and distinct experiences with rape, motherhood, and the family, Spillers locates black women "in the center of" "American race and gender magic" and "in the heart of [femaleness's] terrain" (95). In other words, what appears to be "peripheral" turns out to be central; what is in the interstices of discourse will shatter the discourse itself. Spillers notes that "the goal is not an articulating of sexuality so much as it is a global restoration and dispersal of power" (96), which might come through the establishment of "a *comparative* human order, whose primary noun Person has been modified to points of a detailed refinement" (95-96). Rather than fighting to be included in a self-referential discourse of sexuality developed as part of a modern, European-American articulation of subjectivity, what is needed, according to Spillers, is the production of difference. Rather than more discourse about Man (or, for American feminists, [white] Woman), what is called for is richer description to complicate the definition of human. Spillers's analysis suggests that black women, already outside the discourse Foucault describes, have the opportunity to pursue this redefinition.

Butler theorizes subjectivity through embodiment in a way that contests liberal self-possession, in line with (but slightly before) the interventions of Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, as discussed by Alexander Weheliye. Weheliye calls for a remapping of theories of biopolitics that recognizes black feminist theory *as* biopolitics theory. How might placing Wynter and Spillers at

the center of this discourse both expand and particularize this discourse, most often attributed to Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben? Wynter's object of study, in other words, is not "the radical particularity of black life and culture," according to Weheliye, but rather "the role of racialization in shaping the modern human" (29). In the work of Wynter and Spillers, Weheliye reads "flesh" as both vulnerable to violence and possessing the potential to deconstruct "Man," the purportedly universal category of the human used to dehumanize marginalized groups. Drawing from Grosz's concept of "relationality of the flesh," Weheliye argues that "flesh resists the legal idiom of personhood as property" (44).

Wynter's work shows "Man" to be a historically-contingent invention, suggesting that we might invent other categories of the human. In particular, she traces the shift from a Christian definition of Man, before the Renaissance, to the post-Reformation secular Man, who is "the political subject of the state" (263). Where Wynter departs from Foucault is in her insistence that man as political subject *requires* the codification of racial difference during colonial projects and slavery (263). If Man as political subject is built upon racial difference, relying on a civilized/uncivilized binary just as the earlier Christian definition of Man relied on the distinction between natural and supernatural (264), then fundamentally different genres of the human will emerge from embodied experiences that reject the European-derived "human being." Wynter locates a second transformation in the "human" in the 19th century, which she identifies as the passage from Man1 to Man2. Whereas Man1, the first instantiation of political Man, relies on the development of the natural sciences, which imply that man is separate from nature, Man2 emerges through the development of the biological sciences, which allowed racial difference to be situated on a biological-evolutionary hierarchy, with white Europeans at the top (264-66). While Butler contests this biologized, racialized "Man" throughout *Wild Seed* through

Anyanwu's human body, in particular through the "relationality of flesh," there is something especially suggestive about performing this contestation through a non-human body. By narrating sexual pleasure in a scene of animal transformation, Butler disarticulates sexuality, as it has been defined over the last few centuries, from various hegemonic definitions of the human.

The dolphin scene shows more clearly than any other in *Wild Seed* that Anyanwu's "sexuality" emerges from an ongoing transformation, which includes an increasingly-attuned awareness of her body and cultivation of the senses. Anyanwu's experience thus suggests a potential rerouting of the mechanism Foucault describes. There is no prior "truth" of Anyanwu's sex, no core "sexuality" constituting her subjectivity. Rather, her body and its pleasures emerge from experience, and this point is made most clearly when Anyanwu is learning to inhabit a dramatically transformed version of her body for the first time. (It is important to note, again, that while Doro lives in other people's bodies, Anyanwu is always in her own body, though she may seem to be in "another" body. That is, as a dolphin, Anyanwu explores capacities *of her own body* for the first time.)

Through this scene, therefore, Butler suggests that subjectivity emerges from the body, which is always undergoing transformation. The dolphin transformation represents key aspects of Anyanwu's erotic education. It opens her to different kinds of pleasures, including those she had classified as "abomination," and it trains her senses in new ways, allowing her to continue to "acquire" a dolphin's body in Latour's sense, even *after* she has transformed herself into dolphin shape. Audre Lorde's essay, "The Uses of the Erotic," shows how this erotic/sensory knowledge leads to care and social transformation. Lorde distinguishes between the erotic and the pornographic, opposing the latter while affirming the need for women to experience pleasure and, indeed, to direct their lives based on the knowledge that arises from that pleasure. The erotic

is “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (88), and it may be felt while “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (89). Crucially, Lorde relates the erotic to social life and care. She argues that “[t]he sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (89). Pleasure helps to create a more just society.

Lorde also insists that “[t]he aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible” (88). In chapter 2, I discussed Lorde’s claim that parenting black children requires teaching them “self-definition” and “letting go,” and “The Uses of the Erotic” may be read as a further elaboration of how this is done: through experiences that bring people a “sense of satisfaction and completion” (88). Lorde emphasizes, furthermore, the significance of developing one’s capacities; she clarifies that the erotic is not a drive toward perfection, but rather “a question of how *acutely and fully we can feel* in the doing” (88; emphasis mine). This line suggests a continuous cultivation of the senses (and emotions) in line with Anyanwu’s. Finally, a metaphor of care further links the erotic to caregiving: “The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (89). If Lorde suggests through this metaphor that the erotic “cares for” knowledge, bringing it into the world and helping it grow, might she also be suggesting that the erotic directs women to better care for those around them? Lorde’s essay, along with *Wild Seed*, Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, and Spillers’s “Interstices,” suggests that paying attention to sensory experience and embodied pleasure will lead to a different understanding of the world and a profoundly altered sociality. Describing sexual pleasure as Butler does points away from the established discourse of sexuality and

towards the elaboration of the world that everyone is in, "one that can be partially shared," as Donna Haraway claims ("Situated" 187).

Motherhood as Constraint and Pleasure

Anyanwu's freest, most pleasurable experiences of embodiment, like the dolphin scene, may seem at odds with the stark restrictions of her life under Doro's power. These restrictions are enforced, as I have pointed out, by the fact that she is a mother, and so motherhood might be said to limit Anyanwu. But her caregiving, including motherhood, also comes from pleasure, and pleasurable experiences of care emerge even from the restrictions of life with Doro.

After Doro forces Anyanwu to marry Isaac and leaves them with the rest of his people in a village north of New York, it is more and more difficult for Anyanwu to be subject to Doro. She comes to hate Doro for his "unnecessary killings, his casual abuse when he was not courting her, his open contempt for any belief of hers that did not concur with his, the blows for which she could not retaliate and from which she could not flee" (169-70). Anyanwu cannot flee because she has young children; Doro understands that her desire to protect them from him keeps her bound to him. From the beginning of their acquaintance, Doro views Anyanwu's status as a mother as a disadvantage for her and an advantage for him. Upon meeting her, he reflects that her great independence and power might make her difficult to "tame," but he notes that because "[s]he had sons and she cared for them . . . she was vulnerable" (20). (Here, "cared for" is meant in the sense of "cared about"; her sons are grown and live apart from her, and Doro has threatened to kill them.) After Anyanwu marries Isaac, she reflects on their marriage bed as the place where they will "make the children who would prolong her slavery" (141).

Though Anyanwu bears children by Isaac, Doro, and other men under unfree conditions, the narrative is clear that none of these children is unwanted. In a later section of the novel set in Louisiana, when Doro has found Anyanwu again after a hundred years, Anyanwu's daughter asks, "We're your weakness, aren't we?" to which Anyanwu responds, "I've never been content without my own around me . . . I could have husbands and wives and lovers into the next century and never have a child. Why should I have so many except that I want them and love them?" (258). At the same time, Anyanwu suffers from living under Doro's power. When she finally leaves after the death of Isaac, her children grown, she reflects that

> Doro had reshaped her. She had submitted and submitted and submitted to keep him from killing her . . . she had formed the habit of submission. In her love for Isaac and for her children, and in her fear of death—especially of the kind of death Doro could inflict—she had given in to him again and again. Habits were difficult to break. The habit of living, the habit of fear . . . even the habit of love. (211)

As earlier, when she says that she is a "coward" because "[l]iving has become too precious a habit," Anyanwu implies that her submission to Doro is a bad "habit" that, once picked up, damages the autonomous self. But this submission leads to flourishing—not in an ideal setting, to be sure, but "finite freedom" and "limited happiness," as Haraway puts it ("Situated Knowledges" 187). Anyanwu's submission to Doro keeps her alive, and her continued life makes possible centuries of care for her own kin, broadly defined: her descendants as well as those she takes in.

In the world of Doro's dominion, care is always compromised, but it is not futile. On the contrary, the novel suggests that Anyanwu develops capacities of care *in response to* Doro's breeding project, autocratic and violent as it is. For example, she learns to care for people who

are “in transition,” coming into their special powers for the first time. This is usually a painful process, causing physical-psychic-emotional suffering, and sometimes death. Of Anyanwu’s capacity for care, Isaac reflects that “She was a healer in more ways than Doro seemed to understand . . . Ironically, Anyanwu herself often seemed not to understand. She thought the sick came to her only for her medicines and her knowledge. Within herself, she had something she did not know she had” (197). While Doro and Anyanwu think that Anyanwu’s healing powers are her knowledge (and embodied technology) of medicine, Isaac considers her care to extend beyond this. He reflects that Nweke, a daughter whom Anyanwu is shepherding through transition, “no doubt . . . understood” this power (197). Isaac refers to Anyanwu’s capacity not only to care for a person, but to make them feel cared for. In the course of living within Doro’s breeding project, Anyanwu develops an ability beyond the already sophisticated ones she had at the beginning of the novel.

It is significant that Anyanwu describes her “habit of submission,” above, as being “reshaped.” Are we perhaps to think of Anyanwu’s strategic submission as another kind of transformation, existing in some relation to her embodied shape-shifting? Of course, these transformations are very different: one is guided by and leads to pleasure and freedom, and the other happens under conditions of oppression. But Anyanwu’s “reshaping” by Doro allows her to care for many generations of descendants and non-biological kin in the community, which is its own form of pleasure. Thinking that “Nothing [Doro] did gave her pleasure,” she corrects herself: “No, her children gave her pleasure” (170). After Anyanwu has escaped Doro’s first American community and established her own, and he finds her, he offers—in lieu of killing her or her son—to bring his descendants and gathered “wild seed” to her plantation, to interbreed the groups. Having no other option, Anyanwu agrees to this: “if the offspring are strange and hard to

handle, I will handle them. I will take care of them" (238). In fact, some of Doro's offspring are strange, and one of them uses mind-control to kill one of her children (prompting another child to commit suicide). When Anyanwu tells Doro that she wants "no more of that kind" near her, Doro tells her that the murderer was her great-great grandchild and reminds her of her promise: "I told you your descendants would not be easy to care for. You chose to care for them anyway," at which Anyanwu reflects, "He made it sound as though her choice had been free, as though he had not coerced her into choosing" (261).

This kind of situation is what Butler does best: communities formed and maintained under compromised conditions. Reading her novels is a complicated experience; the meanings and possibilities of/in these communities are not immediately apparent. The reader of *Wild Seed* most likely wishes Doro away, especially when he invades the home Anyanwu establishes after her successful escape. Why must he always return to threaten her children and her life? What might Anyanwu be able to accomplish without his violence and coercion? But one sees (especially upon subsequent readings) what she accomplishes *under* this coercion. Though Doro is a tyrant, he creates a context in which Anyanwu can help people live well with their unusual and sometimes difficult gifts of perception. As she insists above, Anyanwu does not freely choose this. Anyanwu also insists, against Doro's claim that she is "in competition with [him], raising witches of [her] own" (231), that her community in Louisiana is nothing like his breeding project, though she later reflects, "perhaps her gathering of all these special ones, these slightly strange ones would accomplish the same purpose as his breeding. She was herself, gathering family" (235).

Doro's and Anyanwu's fundamentally opposed ethics—exploitation vs. care—matter, but it also matters, the novel suggests, that Anyanwu tolerates Doro's violence until, at the end of the

novel, after knowing each other for almost two hundred years, Doro finally gives up some of his power. Exhausted from dealing with him, Anyanwu plans to die, and Doro, facing an eternity alone, discovers for the first time that he loves someone. When one of Anyanwu's people begs Doro to "heal" Anyanwu, to prevent her from ending her life, Doro reflects, "He had not thought in terms of healing her before. . . . Let him do what he could to heal the healer" (292). After he weeps for the first time in his life, Anyanwu decides to keep living, and the two come to an agreement whereby Doro can no longer "destro[y] his breeders after they had served him" or threaten Anyanwu's children (296). This is not an unqualified victory for Anyanwu; Doro still kills (which is like a reflex for him when he needs a new body, a fundamental quality of his existence that he is unable to change) and she agrees to this détente "uncomfortably" (297). But the fact that Doro thinks of healing after a lifetime of exploiting signals a significant change, not only for him but for the world over which he and Anyanwu may exercise so much power in the future. This profound change is made possible by Anyanwu's vulnerability: as a mortal, and as a mother. It is what teaches her to be powerful without being a "master."

Anyanwu's limited freedom under Doro's rule makes possible an imperfect form of life that nonetheless generates in her a capacity for care and, in Anyanwu and her community, continuously transformed senses. So far, I have discussed how Anyanwu's attention to her body and the world leads to transformation, care, and healing. The novel also suggests that the expansion of embodied capacities throughout the community could lead to a fundamentally different society. Looking at one of his daughters who is descended from "a wild-seed Indian woman who read thoughts and saw into distant closed places," Doro considers that

> [t]he Indians were rich in untrapped wild seed that they tended to tolerate or even revere rather than destroy. Eventually, they would learn to be civilized and to understand as the

> whites understood that the hearing of voices, the seeing of visions, the moving of inanimate objects when no hand touched them, all the strange feelings, sensitivities, and abilities were evil or dangerous, or at the very least, imaginary. Then they too would weed out or grind down their different ones, thus freezing themselves in time, depriving their kind of any senses but those already familiar, depriving their children and their children's children of any weapons with which to confront Doro's people. (159-60)

This passage suggests that social transformation happens through sensory expansion and that this transformation has been dramatically curtailed by the imperatives of "civilization." Earlier in the novel, upon arriving in New York, Isaac notes that they are now in "civilization" and therefore that Anyanwu must wear European clothing, which she finds oppressive. When Anyanwu asks, "What is civilization?" Isaac has no answer but looks at Doro "uncomfortably" (104). Shortly after this, Doro impresses upon Anyanwu the importance of hiding their special powers from others, noting that "Every witch-scare one person's foolishness creates can hurt many" (105). Together, these moments suggest that civilization "is" the persecution of non-normative ways of sensing and knowing the world.

The people Doro seeks out possess a range of abilities, from psychokinesis (moving an object with one's mind) to mind-reading to feeling other people's sensations and emotions. While psychokinesis tends to grant power or pleasure, mind-reading is mixed, and the latter capacity leads to misery, especially in a slave-holding society. Thomas, a malnourished alcoholic recluse, lives in a cabin in Virginia far from other people so that he can avoid reading their minds (Doro brings him women to breed with). Luisa, who lives with Anyanwu in Louisiana, "had a sensitivity that had made closeness with other people a torture to her for most of her life," especially since she grew up on a plantation: "she literally felt what the slaves felt, shared

fragments of their meager pleasure and far too many fragments of their pain" (247). Both characters are white, and their abilities have varied social-emotional outcomes. Thomas's ability drives him (literally and figuratively) farther from people, and his ideas about race are standard for his time and place; when he meets Anyanwu, he uses the n-word. (After she is kind to him, however, and heals his body, he becomes a sympathetic character, and she grieves when Doro kills him.) Luisa's ability, on the other hand, seems to point to the possibility of non-hegemonic ways of seeing—allowing, for example, the daughter of a slave-owner to perceive the cruelty of slavery. In both cases, though, Anyanwu provides the context for these people to live well: in her community, Luisa finds for the first time "people whose presence she could endure without pain" (247). It is not just a question, therefore, of "tolerat[ing]" or "rever[ing]" such people; *Wild Seed* demonstrates that such abilities come with pain in addition to power and pleasure. Some people, with Anyanwu's help, learn to live well with their abilities, and the community itself is shaped by these abilities. Others are miserable and die by suicide, but their descendants may live well if Doro breeds them strategically. In this way, the novel suggests possibilities for the emergence of new ways of life in both the short and the long term (and doesn't shy away from the fact that some people will suffer for the benefit of their descendants).[45]

[45] Sami Schalk argues for the integration of black feminist and disability studies approaches in readings of speculative fiction. She argues that reading the "hyperempathy" experienced by characters in Butler's *Parable* series as a disability makes visible the simultaneous pain and pleasure of hyperempathy; its social context; and its material reality (rather than, say, its metaphorical meaning) (87-102). Lauren's hyperempathy is similar though not identical to Luisa's ability; while Lauren unwillingly feels what she *thinks* others are feeling (Schalk 89), Luisa "literally felt what the slaves felt" (247). In my reading of *Wild Seed*, I draw upon Schalk's point that reading hyperempathy as a disability highlights the importance of social context: "hyperempathy could theoretically result in more positive experiences of shared pleasure than shared pain, but the context in which Lauren is living makes her experience more prone to pain, abuse, and trauma" (98). Schalk also argues that "hyperempathy is experienced as disabling and understood as a disability by those characters who have it" (88). Therefore, while some of the abilities in *Wild Seed*, like Luisa's, could certainly be read as disabilities, the variety of abilities in this novel precludes a reading of these extraordinary abilities as disabilities across the board.

Therefore, I am not suggesting that "the strange feelings, sensitivities, and abilities" mentioned above lead directly to pleasure or flourishing. As is generally the case in Butler's fiction, they point to a complex and painful route to transformation. I also want to resist any idealization of the often-debilitating "hearing of voices" in some forms of mental illness or of any form of what Margaret Price calls "*unbearable pain*—that is, the sort of pain that impels one to self-injure or to consider or attempt suicide" (276). Price points out that "the turn toward desire" in disability studies, while valuable in many ways, might "move too quickly past the question of undesirability … pain … [and] *badness*" (275).[46] With this risk in mind, I read this passage as claiming the (difficult) necessity of allowing, nurturing, and perceiving new capacities of the body over time. As these capacities emerge, some of their painful qualities are alleviated by Anyanwu's care and knowledge.

These alternative experiences of embodiment also resist what Silvia Federici describes as the redefinition of the body during the consolidation of capitalism in Europe in the 15th through 17th centuries. The habits of work that capitalism required had to be instilled, often by force: governments had to create workers. A crucial part of the creation of the worker was a new understanding of the body as mechanized, as "the subject of the will" (*Caliban* 140). In Descartes, "the body is divorced from the person, it is literally dehumanized" at the same time that it is made into that person's property, "enclosed" as the commons were in the early modern period (140). According to Federici, witches were a threat in the early modern period because they refused to accept this sequestered model of the body and furthermore, because they carried

[46] Price points out that in feminist disability studies, "we wish to celebrate difference, or at least to avoid saying that one manifestation of personhood (being disabled) is worse than any other. Yet, at the same time, merely by positing desires, we *a priori* cannot help mapping the undesirable" (276).

knowledge about contraception and abortion.[47] Anyanwu's embodiment carries forward "the concept of the body as a receptacle of magical powers that had prevailed in the medieval world," and which had to be destroyed in order for capitalism to take root (Federici, *Caliban* 141). "At the basis of magic was an animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit, and thus imagined the cosmos as a *living organism*," Federici writes (141).

How different is this medieval magic from Latour's notion of "acquiring a body" in constant interaction with the world? If supposedly "external" objects like a scents kit, a flower, food, or other people create the body by teaching it to be "affected," are not the body and the world constantly and unpredictably creating each other in a process that might be described as magic? We miss this transforming body—and therefore, we also miss crucial biological systems like the gut-brain axis—when we insist upon a separation between body and world. Indeed, when we think of the body in militaristic terms, as Haraway points out, as territory to be defended, rather than as a transforming collection of capacities (and, indeed, organisms) embedded in a transforming world, we fundamentally misapprehend the body and cannot thrive. Federici notes that *Caliban and the Witch* was inspired by her time teaching in Nigeria in the 1980s, during the imposition of privatization and austerity measures by the IMF and the World Bank: "In Nigeria I realized that the struggle against structural adjustment is part of a long struggle against land

[47] Such "reproductive crimes" were especially egregious during periods of low population growth, such the 16th and 17th centuries, when indigenous death in the American colonies, death by plague in Europe, and lower birth rates among the European working classes led to what Federici calls "the first international economic crisis" (86). Federici claims that it was this earlier period of crisis, "not the end of famine in Europe in the 18th [century] (as Foucault has argued) that turned reproduction and population growth into state matters, as well as primary objects of intellectual discourse" (86). "Reproductive crimes" are not the focus of *Wild Seed*, though Anyanwu's complete integration of body and mind means that every conception is intentional. Once she has conceived, however, she refuses to abort (284). With the exception of a scene in which, disturbed by something Doro has said after sex, she alters her reproductive organs so that she will not become pregnant by him, Butler does not give us "reproductive crimes" in this novel (131).

privatization and the 'enclosure' not only of communal lands but also of social relations that stretches back to the origin of capitalism in 16th-century Europe and America" (9). *Wild Seed*'s embodied transformations resist the enclosure of the body at the very moment that American political narratives of austerity claimed that citizenship requires self-governance, the management of a body unconnected to other bodies. A belief in bodies as distinct from everything around them erases the work of care because it supports the notion of the individual as self-making. *Wild Seed* demonstrates that paying attention differently to one's body yields a different body, different sensory capacities, and enhanced capacities of care. Following pleasure and curiosity situates one's body differently in the world. The result is not omnipotence or mastery, but rather the vulnerable, changeable experience of having a body. Anyanwu asks Doro critically, "What is there of you that can be touched?" (231), and the novel proposes that touch and all the senses—including those that haven't yet been acknowledged or articulated—direct how we live and care for others.

In the passage above, I suggest that we read white people "freezing themselves in time" by persecuting witches as analogous to any failure by a dominant culture to investigate new or unusual capacities of sensation and knowledge. Though the novel is set in the past, its speculative components suggest an alternative present, and the longevity of its protagonist and antagonist also point toward the future. Therefore, *Wild Seed* suggests simultaneously an alternative, parallel *history* of embodiment and pleasure and a utopian future.

Pleasure in Vulnerability in *The Argonauts*

Like Anyanwu's experience of "acquiring" a body as a dolphin, pleasurable, nourishing experiences of life in *The Argonauts* come from paying attention to sensation, not from asserting

a fundamental self that is prior to sensation. *The Argonauts*'s discussions of hormones and embodied transformations suggest that subjectivity is always in flux and emerges from encounters with the world. First, as I mentioned earlier, the book implies that transformation, rather than transition, might be a better way of thinking about the change that Harry undergoes, as he remarks about the term "trans," "*I'm not on my way anywhere*" (53). Nelson also notes that while some people do want to "leav[e] one gender entirely behind," the "mainstream narrative" that the term "trans" "evokes" of "an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations" does not describe many trans experiences (52). What might be most limiting about this sense of "trans" is the fixedness of the destinations. If a trans person is on their way somewhere (as Harry says he is not), perhaps there is less room to remake life within the constraints of gender. Instead, Nelson insists on narrating the body as transforming, thereby finding new spaces for freedom *even within* experiences constructed by gender, like Harry's transition and her own pregnancy.[48] While "trans" might imply that the destination is known in advance, the transformations narrated in this book are continuous; there is no destination.

Nelson describes being pregnant while Harry begins taking testosterone and gets top surgery: "On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more 'male,' mine, more and more 'female.' But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging" (83). This reflection comes after a waiter in Florida "cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours"; Nelson surmises that Harry is

[48] Nelson writes that Harry "is happy to identify as a butch on T" (53), refers to him as "*blessedly neither male nor female*" (143), and notes that *The New York Times*, writing about Harry's art in 2008, required him to be identified either as "Mr." or "Ms." (137). (He chooses "Ms.," "to take one for the team.") Throughout the book, Nelson refers to Harry as "he." The book does not imply (nor am I arguing) that identifying "as a butch on T" is better or more transgressive than identifying as a trans man. Rather, it raises the question of what interesting possibilities might be lost, and what trans experiences obscured, by the assumption that *every* trans person believes that they were "born in the wrong body," as Nelson puts it (52).

passing as a man (83). The description above, then, suggests that we think of pregnancy and gender transition not as experiences of "gendering," but rather as instances of the more general changeability (also known as mortality) that all people go through. The benefit of this way of thinking is that it shows what trans and pregnant people have in common with everyone else. The downside is that it underplays the way that pregnancy and gender transition are situated in calcified gender logics. There is a history of pregnant women being simultaneously dehumanized and celebrated (as Nelson notes when she recounts being saluted while pregnant by a member of the military [89]). There is also a history of gender dissidents being ostracized, brutalized, and killed. Still, there is value in thinking of pregnancy and gender transition as continuous transformations rather than teleological processes (to "fully become" a reproductive woman; to "fully become" a man). When paired with the book's discussions of hormones, this vision of transformation suggests, first, that we might orient subjectivity around feeling, and second, that by paying attention, we continuously educate ourselves on how to feel (and thus how to be).

First, Nelson recalls not wanting to have sex late in pregnancy, "all touch starting to sicken": "that hormones can make the feel of wind, or the feel of fingers on one's skin, change from arousing to nauseating is a mystery deeper than I can track or fathom. The mysteries of psychology pale in comparison, just as evolution strikes me as infinitely more spiritually profound than Genesis" (85). It is significant that Nelson treats an experience of nausea and discomfort with wonder. She draws a parallel between hormonal sensory transformations and the transformations of evolution: both constitute a "mystery" worthy of investigation. The pairing of psychology with Genesis is also suggestive; might "psychology" (however this is defined) be the sacred text of secular, 21st-century societies? Psychology has certainly been used (recently and not so recently) to various regressive ends, and to the extent that psychology discourses claim

that "the mind" has qualities that can be described, they risk suggesting that it has an independent reality, apart from the body. In a similar vein, Genesis implies that man and woman, having an origin, are fixed at the time of creation.

Furthermore, a consideration of pleasure in breastfeeding suggests a different way of organizing feelings of pleasure. Nelson notes a baby care book's discussion of "Sexual Feelings While Breastfeeding," paraphrasing the book's attempt to reassure women that "because the hormones unleashed by breast-feeding are the same as those unleashed by sex, you could be forgiven for the mix-up" (44). Nelson reflects, "But how can it be a mix-up, if it's the same hormones? How does one go about partitioning one sexual feeling off from another, presumably more 'real' sexual feeling? . . . It isn't *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair" (44). Nelson clarifies that motherhood is "romantic, erotic, and consuming—but without tentacles. . . . It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology." Nelson's intervention is to refuse a framework that understands breastfeeding as "imitation-sex." The problem is not that breastfeeding hormones are the same as sex hormones; the problem is that the feeling produced (in part) by a particular hormone has been classified as a "sexual feeling," thereby creating panic whenever this feeling comes up in a non-sexual context. The problem, once again, is the discourse of sexuality, which prevents us from noticing how we and the world create each other from moment to moment.

In this case, labeling "sexual feelings while breastfeeding" a "mix-up" would have prevented Nelson from exploring the erotics of motherhood, "an eros without teleology." Rather than the Freudian or Lacanian concept of desire, which always implies lack, this pleasure "is not on its way anywhere," to adapt Harry's remark—it has no goal. From an experience of touch, Nelson theorizes desire (or pleasure) in a way that unsettles the established primacy of "sexuality." Touch and the surface of the body are also central to the philosophy of Gilles

Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as when they insist that the body be understood not as the container of a unified subject, but rather as the Body without Organs (BwO), meaningful only as a surface that meets other surfaces (150-52). Opposing subjectivity itself, psychoanalysis, and all systems that produce a supposedly prior form of "organization" (such as the organism), Deleuze and Guattari call for new forms of life through assemblages. Their association of the "organism" with "God" recalls Nelson's preference of hormones and evolution to psychology and Genesis:

> The *judgment of God,* the system of the judgment of God, the theological system, is precisely the operation of He who makes an organism, an organization of organs called the organism, because He cannot bear the BwO . . . The organism is already that, the judgment of God, from which medical doctors benefit and on which they base their power. (158-59)

One of the stakes for this analysis is a concept of desire no longer oriented around lack. Deleuze and Guattari define desire "as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it" (154). According to Grosz, this notion is promising for feminists

> insofar as women have been the traditional repositories and guardians of the lack constituent of desire, and insofar as the opposition between presence and absence, reality and fantasy, has traditionally defined and constrained women to inhabit the place of man's other. . . . In place of plenitude, being, fullness or self-identity is not lack, absence, rupture, but rather becoming. (*Volatile* 165)

Put differently, if neither castration anxiety (as in Freud) nor the impossible pursuit of the "image of completion" (as in Lacan) defines the subject (Mansfield 46), then qualities like self-sufficiency or coherence are no longer values. As a result, autonomy might be thought of as

compatible with, rather than threatened by, giving and receiving care. By attending to the specific bodily experiences of pleasure and care (which Deleuze and Guattari do not do), *The Argonauts* and *Wild Seed* begin to fill in the kind of desire that women might claim.

In other words, what might *The Argonauts*'s discussions of hormones demonstrate about how we are constituted not primarily by a mind or psyche, but by touch? For one, touch involves what is beyond the skin; that is, the rest of the world. As I discussed in chapter 1, Judith Butler describes subject-formation as a (gendered) problem of narration and conceptualizes this through touch. Drawing upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work, Butler relates the (impossible) inauguration of the subject to the paradox of touch. Because it is impossible to fully separate touching and being touched, and acting and being acted upon, it is hard to say what subject might exist apart from what "impresses itself upon" it (*Senses* 11). For this reason, Butler claims that "we require forms of fiction to arrive at self-understanding . . . If one seeks to give an account of a condition in which series and sequence were themselves a rather stark problem, as was the distinction between active and passive, then one has to find other means or allow for narrative to bespeak its own impossibility" (*Senses* 16). These "forms of fiction" need not literally be fiction (or other literary genres), but I am convinced that imaginative literature is uniquely suited to the paradoxical task of narrating the self. In this chapter and the ones that precede it, I have shown how this narration happens through attention to the body, as that body engages in—or refuses—motherhood. Motherhood does away with the concept of sovereignty; this is true even for those women, like *Motherhood*'s narrator and Meridian Hill, who refuse motherhood. Women in literature of motherhood make the world from their bodies. Again, these experiences are diverse, from painful experiences of illness, PMS, and unwanted pregnancy to ecstatic spirituality to a

utopian social life generated from embodied feeling. In all cases, the experience of "motherhood" teaches women that touch creates us, from moment to moment.

Vulnerability and Form

In this final section, I will consider how *The Argonauts*, in conversation with queer and feminist theory, gestures toward a concept of pleasure in vulnerability that is specific to motherhood. I say "gestures toward" because it is not clear what the social meaning of this concept might be. I argue that this is a problem of form, specifically of the politics of personal narrative, with which Anne Boyer is so concerned in *The Undying*, as I discussed in chapter 1.

One of the theorists cited in the margins of *The Argonauts* is Susan Fraiman, and the text might be said to respond directly to Fraiman's call to take mothers seriously as sexual subjects.[49] As I discussed in the introduction, Fraiman argues that cultural narratives of "coolness"—rebellion, dissent, non-normativity—work by marginalizing women and especially mothers. This plays out not only in particularly masculinist corners of popular culture, where we might expect it (as in the films of Quentin Tarantino), but also in cultural studies, including queer and feminist theory of the 1990s. As Nelson relates (67-69), Fraiman discusses Lee Edelman's reading of Freud's analysis of the Wolf Man case wherein an analysand recalls seeing his parents having sex "doggy style." Edelman finds in Freud "an unelaborated suggestion that his vision of parental heterosex may actually code a fantasy of gay male sex," and Fraiman points out that "the price of Edelman's useful revision . . . is the mother's desiring body, which is thereby quite

[49] *The Argonauts* cites theory and philosophy rather enigmatically, indicating quoted words with italics rather than quotation marks, and listing the author's name (but no title of work, date, or page number) in the margin. Jackie Stacey writes that she was "irritated" by these citations, which were impractical and "assumed a great deal of cultural capital" (204). I also find the citations unhelpful, especially in the context of writing a dissertation; they suggest that I should refer to something to enrich my understanding of her discussion, but they make it impossible for me to do so, unless I am familiar enough with the theorist to guess which work this quote (or paraphrased idea) comes from. Visually, they are appealing in a minimalist way, but tonally, they are coy and even hostile.

casually written out of the sexual imaginary" (134). Fraiman suggests, furthermore, that this primal scene need not be understood as procreative; even if the act witnessed was vaginal intercourse, it "invoke[s] . . . the sodomitical" (134). So why not grant the mother "access *even as a mother* to non-normative, nonprocreative sexuality" (135)? Fraiman calls on "contemporary queer reading[s]" to "recuperate the sodomite as a child-bearing female, precisely because she falls outside stigmatized as well as normative identity categories" (135), and this, we might say, is quite literally where Nelson starts. The opening scene of *The Argonauts* finds Nelson being "fuck[ed] . . . in the ass" by Harry early in their relationship, her "face smashed against the cement floor" (3). This sex is imbued with an unstable, exciting power differential: besides the suggestion of roughness, Nelson says "*I love you*" while it's happening and later, "feral with vulnerability," sends Harry a Roland Barthes passage about "how the subject who utters the phrase 'I love you' is like 'the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name'" (5). Nelson writes, "I thought the passage was romantic. You read it as a possible retraction. In retrospect, I guess it was both" (5).

In framing her relationship this way, Nelson presents various vulnerabilities: of falling in love quickly, of sub-dom sex, and of being a changing being in love with another changing being. The image of the lover as sailor rebuilding their ship en route takes on an especially rich meaning in a book so attentive to embodied transformations. We can think of Nelson and Harry saying "I love you" as each "I" and "you" is changing, visibly and invisibly. Furthermore, the image of the Argo falling apart and being rebuilt mid-voyage resonates with one of the book's refrains, "*falling forever, going to pieces*," which is borrowed from the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, one of Nelson's primary muses. Winnicott is known for his theory of the "good enough" mother, which suggests that good mothering *means* failing your baby in some ways;

this failure is part of how the baby learns how to live in the world. "*Falling forever, going to pieces*" (which, it should be noted, Winnicott uses to describe the baby who lacks care, *not* one whose mother is "good enough" [Nelson 33]), most directly describes Nelson's experience of pregnancy and childbirth, but especially in the context of the book's opening scene, it also recalls Leo Bersani's argument that being penetrated in sex enacts a "self-shattering," "a masochism to which the melancholy of the post-Oedipal superego's moral masochism is wholly alien, and in which, so to speak, the self is exuberantly discarded" (217-18). Bersani argues against efforts, in queer and feminist theory, to redeem sex as a democratic force, claiming instead that "*the value of sexuality itself is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it*" (222). He agrees with anti-pornography feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon that sex is "anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving," though he disagrees with them about what to do about this: Dworkin and MacKinnon think that sex must be reinvented, while Bersani believes that these qualities give sex "inestimable value" (215).

We might argue that Nelson's "*falling forever, going to pieces*" is a feminist and maternal revision of Bersani's "self-shattering."[50] Nelson goes to pieces while falling in love with (and being fucked by) Harry, and she feels like she might go to pieces during labor, when she is unable to defecate "as it was keenly clear to me that letting go of the shit would mean the total disintegration of my perineum, anus, and vagina, all at once. I also knew that if, or when, I could let go of the shit, the baby would probably come out. But to do so would mean *falling forever, going to pieces*" (83). In addition to this account of labor as a stark experience of powerlessness and power, there is a suggestion of postpartum psychic disintegration—Nelson

[50] Bersani is cited a few times in the margins of *The Argonauts*, but these citations refer (as best I can guess) to texts other than "Is the Rectum a Grave?" However, Nelson does quote Michael Snediker's claim that "One doesn't *really* shatter when one is fucked, despite Bersani's accounts of it as such" (qtd. in Nelson 33).

says she experiences the intrusive mental image of a pair of scissors in her son's head—but it is mentioned only briefly (119). Despite the text's repetition of "*falling forever, going to pieces*," it does not elaborate a social meaning of this term for mothers. It seems to refer to something personal: Nelson's love for her partner and baby. The fact that *The Argonauts* is partially addressed to Harry—he is the frequently-appearing "you"—reinforces the sense that this book is really about a love affair. The text's orientation around this romantic love detracts from its ability to discuss motherhood and care as social issues (which, with its interest in queer and feminist theory, is surely one of its aims).[51]

Kaye Mitchell argues that *The Argonauts* "elaborat[es] a politics and ethics of vulnerability in both its thinking and its formal qualities" which results in "the disruption of any kind of stable narratorial 'I'" and "a refusal of the assumed sovereignty of selfhood and authorship" (194, 197). While I agree that the text thinks through vulnerability, because it reads like a traditional memoir, it tends to point to what is already in existence rather than enacting something new. That is, the memoir form, even (or especially?) when infused with theory, does not allow Nelson to refuse sovereignty. Rather, *The Argonauts* has, as Sheila Heti suggests, a "pedagogical feeling, as if the reader were a student of hers" (Miller and Bailar 164). In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider passages of *The Argonauts* alongside passages of texts considered in previous chapters whose *forms* demand that we think differently about motherhood.

Style and the Problem with Memoir

[51] I recognize that the argument that queer parents are more focused on their partners than their children has been used to oppose queer parenthood. Here, I am arguing that the formal qualities of Nelson's text, including its moments of direct address to Harry, make *the text* more focused on a romantic couple *and* on the love of one mother for her child than on social care.

The clash in *The Argonauts* between its interest in vulnerability and its didactic style might be part of what Jackie Stacey registers as the "strange uneasy feeling" she had reading the book, though she does not state this directly; she points to the worshipful reception of the book, which, she writes, "made me feel that to say anything critical about it at all was like being the parent who turns on the lights in the middle of a teenage party" (205). In addition to receiving glowing reviews, *The Argonauts* won the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, and the Barnard Center for Research on Women organized a "salon in honor of Maggie Nelson" in 2016 ("The Argonauts: A Salon"). At that event, Heather Love noted that her friends "were adamant" that she read the book, and that when she finished it, she was "the adamant one: I wanted everyone I know to read it immediately" ("Working").

Reflecting on the "autotheory" genre, in which she includes Maggie Nelson, Mari Ruti claims that "there's an obvious parallel between breaking the patterns of straight (heteropatriarchal) culture and breaking the mold of 'straight' academic writing" (xxxi). My point, against this perspective (which underlies much of the praise for *The Argonauts*), is that bringing personal testimony into academic writing does not necessarily make that writing more transgressive or oppositional. As Foucault argued forty years ago (and it has only become more true), personal testimony is easily integrated into the mechanisms of power; confession creates the modern subject. While confession was at first formalized through the Catholic sacrament of confession, torture, and other means, it now saturates culture, appearing to be no longer coercive; however, "one has to have an inverted image of power in order to believe that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization—repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking—are speaking to us of freedom" (60). Anne Boyer is

acutely aware that confession does not lead to freedom, and *The Undying*, which I discussed in chapter 1, is an attempt to find a form that can speak differently about the relays between illness and politics, the body and culture, and subjectivity and the body. Boyer's memoir registers differently than Nelson's because she is unhappy with the forms available to her, works hard to create other forms, and foregrounds this struggle in the memoir itself. Boyer writes,

> I do not want to tell the story of cancer in the way that I have been taught to tell it. The way I have been taught to tell the story is a person would be diagnosed, treated, either live or die. If she lives, she will be heroic. If she dies, she will be a plot point. . . . If she lives, she will be the angel of epiphany. If she dies, she will be the angel of epiphany. Or if she is allowed a voice, she can complain in fractured and enigmatic drips or corral situational cliché and/or made-for-TV sentimentality and/or patho-pornography into a good story. Literature sails along on every existing prejudice. (115)

Boyer's rage against the neutralizing force of "literature" is palpable. She refuses to accept a world in which people's suffering is made into something familiar, perhaps cathartic, perhaps just flat. In this narrative economy, survival and death have the same outcome: an epiphany that leads, paradoxically, to nothing at all. So how does Boyer represent her experience, if not in the forms available to her?

First, she refuses to let her language get stuck to a particular emotion that might then get stale:

> Once my hair is gone, once I can no longer taste my food, once I have passed out while shopping for a bread knife in IKEA, once the ex-lovers have all visited to make one last attempt to get me in bed, once the generous humiliations of crowd-sourced charity have

> assured me months of organic produce, I have become a patient. The old ways are through. Any horizon is made of medicine. (93)

Lest we begin to pity Boyer in the first two phrases, she includes the also pitiable but at the same time absurd image of her passing out while shopping for something as mundane as "a bread knife" in the thoroughly generic, anti-romantic setting of IKEA. By way of comparison, here is a scene from Nelson's struggle to get pregnant:

> Insemination after insemination, wanting our baby to be. Climbing up on the cold exam table, abiding the sting of the catheter threaded through the opal slit of my cervix, feeling the familiar cramp of rinsed, thawed seminal fluid pooling directly into my uterus. You holding my hand month after month, in devotion, in perseverance. *They're probably shooting egg whites*, I said, tears sprouting. *Shhh*, you whispered. *Shhh*. (77)

The failure to become pregnant when pregnancy is so desired is intensely painful, but this description does not convey this pain. "Opal slit" is too poetic; it forecasts the ultimate success of this reproductive body, "tears sprouting" has a jaunty, cartoonish quality that distances me from Nelson's sadness, and having one's lover whisper, "*Shh, Shh*" in response to those tears is trite. That is, the tone and diction of the scene are notably similar to other accounts of trial, "perseverance," and redemption. Therefore, though *The Argonauts*'s account of the struggle between normativity and anti-normativity in queer parenting has made it meaningful for many queer parents, the language of this scene does not reveal anything new in the profoundly disheartening situation of a woman approaching 40 trying to conceive through intrauterine insemination.

In Boyer's memoir, on the other hand, rather than a lover holding her hand in "perseverance," we have "ex-lovers" who want to sleep with her. Boyer also has, incongruously,

"months of organic produce," when she says elsewhere that she returns to teaching the same week as her double mastectomy because she fears that she will lose her job if her employer discovers she has cancer. Later, Boyer puts on makeup to convince the doctor that she is well enough to leave the hospital, though she can barely walk: "Whether I am dying or not . . . I have to go to work" (275). In an age of "crowd-sourced charity" (and crowd-funded medical bills) Boyer can expect a windfall of organic produce but not basic financial stability if she is unable to work. The collision of different moods in this strange list—hair loss, bread knife, IKEA, ex-lovers, organic produce—is what it feels like to live under capitalism, where the ridiculous and cruel exist side by side (with small, ironic consolations like organic produce during an illness caused, Boyer insists, by a thoroughly toxic world).

Boyer regrets that a text about cancer "will be judged by its veracity or its utility or its depth of feeling but rarely by its form, which is its motor and its fury, which is a record of the motions of a struggle to know, if not the truth, then the weft of all competing lies" (285). We may not be able to know the truth, but form can bring to light the *texture* of narratives that do not help us, that structure our world in violent ways. Boyer resists the process by which her story is quickly swallowed up by an ossified form with an aim contrary to her own: to reassure people that anything, including cancer, can be overcome. The logic of cancer memoirs is that personal reflection and confession both enable and express the victory over cancer. By Boyer's account—contrary to Ruti's claim that the personal makes academic writing less normative—personal testimony is *the* form of neoliberalism. [52] Nothing is necessarily disrupted by a person telling her

[52] Ruti implies that *The Argonauts* is academic writing, but the book was not published by an academic press and Nelson's (very successful) career is in creative writing, not academia. Invoking personal experience as evidence or context in academic writing is a separate issue (and can be quite effective).

story. The literature in this dissertation suggests, rather, that the *style* in which we tell our stories makes them world-making.

Nelson notes at one point that she and Harry "hate fiction, or at least crappy fiction," and perhaps it is my staunch defense of fiction, and imaginative literature in general, that has set me against Nelson's memoir. Nelson says that fiction "purports to provide occasions for thinking through complex issues, but really it has predetermined the positions, stuffed a narrative full of false choices, and hooked you on them, rendering you less able to see out, to *get* out" (82). I agree that literature and other art forms often do prevent readers from "see[ing] out," but I would argue, with Marcuse, that it is style, not genre, that determines whether the art makes new visions possible (*Aesthetic*).

While Nelson modifies her critique to "crappy fiction" (which presumably addresses style), she nonetheless structures this critique around the question of genre. Furthermore, Nelson's critique is inspired by an X-Men movie, so by "fiction," she presumably also means films—thereby condemning a significant portion of contemporary cultural production as politically retrograde. At the same time, Nelson's discussions of politics preserve a strange distinction between the political and the personal, as these discussions always refer to the couple at the center of the story. That is, politics are happening outside, and the romantic pair is inside: "We hadn't planned on getting married per se. But when we woke up on the morning of November 3, 2008, and listened to the radio's day-before-the-election polling as we made our hot drinks, it suddenly seemed as though Prop 8 was going to pass. . . . Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable)" (23). Nelson refers to the double bind of the queer married couple: too transgressive for conservatives, too conservative for radical queers. The stakes, of course, are high during the campaign to overturn same-sex marriage in

California, largely funded and organized by the Mormon Church and ultimately successful. But the cheeky tone undercuts the richness of this issue. Whatever dissociative strangeness the politics of the early 21st century create for this couple is not reflected in the form of this passage.

The result is a fairly conventional story of a family. Here they are having a "living room dance part[y]":

> We play "Tightrope" by Janelle Monáe over and over again . . . Iggy's big brother holds him by the armpits and spins him around in a wild circle while we scramble to make sure Iggy's chubby legs don't hit any windows or end tables. As one might expect for brothers seven years apart, they almost always play too rough for my liking. . . . It stresses me out to watch them play, but it also makes me feel like I've finally done something unequivocally good. (143)

Bernadette Mayer also writes a "story of an intimate family," as she puts it, in *Midwinter Day* (78). But a description of a family dance party in that poem exemplifies the "aesthetic sublimation" that Marcuse describes, whereby a work of art "shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity" (*Aesthetic Dimension* 7):

> Marie says we've gotta have Talking Heads dance music. / Close to the lower sun, more pink and more red, no clouds, isolation. . . Red brake lights Marie says are stars on the moving cars. The wet street is red. / Lewis dances with Marie. Sophia's caught by the light that's left, gold eyes wide brown almonds . . . She's about to move her hand toward me, she stops, there's a blank sweetness in her interest. . . . Marie stiffens and pulls in her lips, it's a pose. Everything is red even daydreaming, biology, wildlife, Freud. / Sophia says yes, Marie gestures wildly with her arms in the air and pushes her chest out, she has

> Snoopy on her shirt. She says no. . . . Marie dances, red and blue. She's thoughtful, it's a running dance . . . she looks suddenly older. It's an arrogant dance . . . (83-84)

Unlike Nelson's dance party scene, this one asks the reader to reevaluate familiar or customary relationships between words (that is, language).[53] How can "sweetness" be "blank"? What does this suggest about love, affection, children, and mothers? How are "daydreaming, biology, wildlife, Freud" red? To what extent is this description impressionistic, inspired by the red of the setting winter sun and cars' brake lights, and to what extent does it invite a hermeneutics? What is the relationship between visible surfaces and the interpretations they inspire? (What is the relationship between a concept and a color?) What does it mean that a girl appears to her mother to be "thoughtful" one moment and "arrogant" the next? These questions suggest the political possibilities in a text, like Mayer's, that makes language momentarily unfamiliar. As Marcuse insists, and as I discussed in the introduction, "The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions" (7). As a result of this, the "aesthetic sublimation" that Marcuse locates in revolutionary art effects "a desublimation . . . in the perception of individuals—in their feelings, judgments, thoughts; an invalidation of dominant norms, needs, and values" (7-8). In a revision to his earlier argument about how art (as it is consumed and institutionalized) absorbs social discontent ("Affirmative Character"), Marcuse asserts that by shocking or surprising us through its form, art reveals the ways that our senses have been organized. Through formal innovation, art directs us to the forms that structure our lives without our knowledge.

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[53] If, as Ferdinand de Saussure and subsequent poststructuralists claim, language is not a collection of fixed entities (words) but rather a system of differences, and if language shapes thought, then literature that prompts us to recalibrate these differences will change thinking and the world.

Conclusion

This is an argument about the senses; revolutionary art retrains our senses. It is thus part of the project of sensory transformation described in *Wild Seed* and "The Uses of the Erotic," which makes new relations of care possible. It is no coincidence that Mayer's scene is attuned to sensory experience, in this case visual: colors, the appearance of faces and bodies. In contrast, the visual description in Nelson's passage is straightforward, and the narrator's discourse does not suggest anything new about motherhood (cherished toddlers, stress, and overprotective mothers are familiar elements in 21st-century narrations of American family life). In a book about Mayer and other New York School poets, Nelson writes that "one of the principal thematic questions underlying [*Midwinter Day*] is how one might live with and write about the vicissitudes of a heterosexual marriage with children without replaying the smugness or romanticization which can at times seem inherent to the so-called nuclear family" (*Women* 112). This question prophetically prefigures Nelson's own concern in *The Argonauts*,[54] for while the family Nelson writes about is not heterosexual, a friend says of a custom photo-mug showing Nelson, pregnant, with Harry and his son "standing in front of the mantel at my mother's house, which has monogrammed stockings hanging from it," "*I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life*" (13).

The question of how to write about a (hetero or queer) family without falling into "smugness or romanticization" is, of course, related to the question that has guided this dissertation: what can literature tell us about motherhood, a topic that has been obscured by sentimentalism as well as misogyny, by rigid (and inaccurate) notions of biology as well as the

[54] Nelson's critical study, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, was published in 2007, and according to *The Argonauts*, Nelson's relationship with Harry began in October 2007 (3).

erasure of the body? One thing this literature tells us is that attention to the body, and embodied attention to the world, reveals both body and world to be creating each other in ways that challenge the possibility of sovereignty. Body and world come into being together in experiences of motherhood, and the texts that have the most to say about this are themselves forming our senses. One of *The Argonauts*' major implicit claims is that the outcome of a transformation is not known in advance, but the form of her narration implies that the narrator does know the outcome. So, then, does the reader.

In contrast, literature of motherhood that contests "reality" through its form trains us to pay attention differently to relations of care. The form and style of the imaginative texts I have discussed in this dissertation make possible a rethinking of motherhood outside the framework of sovereignty. The writing of Bernadette Mayer and Anne Boyer foregrounds the question of what literary forms do: can a memoir tell a new story, and can care work—pleasurable and painful, striking and mundane—reshape poetry, even as it is (sometimes) what prevents the poets from writing? *Meridian*'s startling juxtapositions and shifts in tone suggest that Meridian is not "at home" in the institution of black motherhood and that new forms of extrafamilial care are required in the ongoing struggle for black liberation. *The Salt Eaters*'s extended sentences, snaking between characters' interiorities, political events, and textured descriptions of setting, enact this extrafamilial care and manifest an expanded concept of the body as (spiritually-materially) connected to everything around it. The fact that Sheila Heti's novel, *Motherhood* (misread by many critics as a memoir), is narrated in real time prevents the narrator from ever expressing certainty. Though Heti may have known how this narrator would end up as she wrote the novel (childless), the novel exists in a state of fundamental openness. Rachel Cusk's "evacuated realism" articulates a feminist freedom that starts from the non-sovereignty of

motherhood rather than independence, and it redescribes reality around this fundamental non-sovereignty. Finally, the tension between the simplicity of *Wild Seed*'s narrative style and the situations it describes, in which constraint and flourishing, pleasure and suffering, cannot be disentangled, produces a productive sense of estrangement.

Art pleases us by producing new juxtapositions of sensation, thought, and relation, and feminism, at its best, does the same. As Linda Zerilli writes,

> Every extension of a political concept always involves an imaginative opening up of the world that allows us to see and articulate relations between things that have none (and any necessary, logical sense), to create relations that are external to their terms. Political relations are always external to their terms: they involve not so much the ability to subsume particulars under concepts but an imaginative element, the ability to see or to forge new connections. (162)

Zerilli's point is that existing rights or freedoms are never extended to a marginalized group; rather, a new concept of freedom must be created (imagined) for that group to become free. Rather than seeking to include care in hegemonic visions of the world, literature of motherhood imagines a world made by care. Instead of the freedom of sovereignty, which denies care, this literature delineates a non-sovereign freedom generated from the (transforming) body.

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